



His Curvy Obsession

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Description: Opposites attract in this short and steamy romance about an alpha billionaire boss and his curvy executive assistant!

Eric

I hate to let good things go to waste.

Rebecca belongs with me – in my bed, specifically.

She says she wants to be a mother more than anything.

I'm the man who can make that wish come true.

The man who can make all of her wishes come true.

The man who can protect and provide.

But Rebecca isn't like the others. She wants more than my money.

She wants my heart.

Rebecca

I've worked for Eric for years, and he's never given me a second look.

Now suddenly he wants to get married and have kids?

Marriage and babies aren't things you should write into a business contract, but I'm not in a position to turn down this deal.

Eric's bossy, domineering attitude should turn me off.

Instead, it's doing the opposite.

He treats me like his property, claiming me and guarding me at the same time.

It feels good to be taken care of.

But I want more from a marriage than a transaction.

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Eric

Elijah rushes into the conference room looking unusually rumpled with his tie undone and his hair still wet from his morning shower.

“Another day in paradise?” Emmett asks, looking up from his laptop at our oldest brother.

“You bet,” Elijah says, grinning broadly.

The shadows under his eyes grow darker by the day, but even so, my oldest brother never seems bothered by the fact that his infant daughter keeps him up at all hours of the night.

“Ellie woke up every two hours last night,” Elijah continues, coming to the table with his briefcase and taking out a laptop of his own. “Teething again.”

“That sucks man,” Emmett says. “For her and for you.”

“It’s fine,” Elijah shrugs. “I’ll catch a nap in my office later.”

“Don’t you have a nanny?” I ask him. “They can’t take care of the baby at night so you can get some sleep?”

“The nanny is only for the daytime,” he explains.

“You can’t hire someone for nights too?” I ask him.

He shoots me an exasperated look.

“Funnily enough, I would like to spend some time with my daughter while she’s a baby,” he says. “Not something you would understand.”

I bristle at this comment. I know my brothers consider me something of a robot. They like to joke that I have no emotions, and I understand why they’d say this.

But the truth is, I do have emotions. I just reserve them for the things that matter most. I don’t get frustrated at the morning traffic like Elijah does. You won’t find me jumping for joy at a football game like Emmett, either.

It takes more, much more, for me to feel any extreme emotions on either end of the spectrum, negative or positive. But this doesn’t mean I have no feelings at all.

“The importance of fatherhood is not lost on me,” I say after a moment. “I was only suggesting solutions to your sleepless nights.”

“Sometimes the solution to a problem is to buckle down and give it time,” Elijah says. “This is only a phase. It’ll pass. There’s no solution to teething. It’s just a stage that the baby has to go through.”

“Listen to this guy,” Emmett says, shaking his head. “The man’s been a dad for less than a year and is already talking about it like he’s a professional.”

“Not a professional,” Elijah replies. “But anyone looks like an expert next to a guy like Eric.”

“True,” Emmett says, looking at me.

Another jab. It shouldn't bother me this much. Growing up as the youngest brother of three, I learned to have thick skin. Most of the time the teasing rolls off of my back. But today, I'm having a hard time brushing it off. I don't know why.

Maybe it's because I've been working so much. I work a lot anyway, but for the last few months it's been nonstop.

Or maybe it's because this particular teasing is about my potential to become a father. Something I plan to do eventually, once I find the right woman.

"I'm just saying," I reply. "It's not as hard as you both make it out to be. Especially with our resources. Your nights don't have to be sleepless. You choose for them to be."

"No offense, little bro," Elijah says. "But I'm not about to take parenting tips from the guy who has no chance in hell of ever becoming a parent."

I'm growing more aggravated, ready to move on from this conversation...until Elijah makes this last remark.

"What makes you think I'll never become a father?" I ask him, straightening in my chair.

Elijah glances at Emmett.

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“Dude, seriously?” Emmett looks at me. “You’re almost forty. You don’t date -”

“Dating isn’t necessary for procreation,” I interject.

“Right,” Emmett rolls his eyes. “But dating is required for getting married -”

“Marriage isn’t required for procreation either.”

“Oh knock it off,” Elijah groans. “Eric, don’t take this as some kind of competitive challenge. We’re just saying: You’re a perpetual bachelor. And you don’t seem to have family very high on your list of priorities. Family. Not just ‘procreation’ but settling down with a wife and having kids. It just...doesn’t seem in the cards for you.”

I lean back in my seat, observing my two older brothers from across the conference room table.

He’s right; I turn forty next week.

“I’d be lying if I said it hasn’t crossed my mind once or twice that I might want to think about securing a wife,” I reply. “You two are married and settled down. One of you has a kid, the other has one on the way...if the two of you can handle it, I’m sure I can pull it off with equal or greater success.”

Emmett laughs and groans at the same time, looking at me in disbelief.

“This isn’t some kind of science experiment,” Elijah says sternly. “It’s not a

competition, either.”

“It’s not,” I agree. “It’s about legacy.”

“Legacy?”

“You have a daughter,” I say to Elijah. Then I turn to Emmett. “And you have a son on the way. Which means that when you both get old and die -”

“Love the cheerful mood this conversation is putting me in,” Emmett mutters.

“- When you both get old and die,” I continue. “You’ll still have a piece of yourself living on through your children. Legacy.”

“Sure, man,” Emmett shrugs. “But that’s not what it’s about. That’s not why people have children.”

“Then why do people have children?” I ask.

“Because!” Emmett begins. “Because...”

He trails off, frowning to himself, not quite sure how to end the sentence.

“People reproduce so that they leave their mark on the world,” I continue. “A lasting mark. Elijah’s DNA will outlive him through his daughter, and through his daughter’s children too. Your son will carry your DNA. This is the reason people have children. To ensure the continuation of their genes. Legacy.”

“You sound like a fucking psycho,” Emmett shakes his head. “That’s not why people have kids. That’s a stupid, selfish reason to have a kid.”

“Maybe it is selfish,” I shrug. “But at the end of the day, it’s the reason. The real reason. Deep down, we all have primal urges. Things that we do without entirely understanding our motivations.”

“Enough about your primal urges,” he groans. “Fuck. Why the hell are we talking about this again?”

“You brought it up,” I say with a shrug.

“Enough,” Elijah says. “Let’s move on. Please.”

He opens his laptop and Emmett settles into his seat. They move on quickly, leaving the topic of fatherhood behind.

But for the rest of the day, it’s all that I can think about.

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Rebecca

“Can you believe it? Thirty years old and still unmarried. I never imagined that I’d be attending your younger sister’s wedding before yours.”

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“Good men are hard to find,” I reply flatly.

“Especially when you don’t eventryto find one. A good man doesn’t just fall into your lap, you know. You have to make an effort.”

I take a sip of my tea and do my best to ignore my mom's not-so-subtle criticism of the fact that I'm still single at the ripe old age of...thirty.

I know, I know. Thirty isn’t old by most people’s standards. But my mom isn’t most people.

In my mom's world, women graduate high school, take a brief detour through college, and get engaged. Then they drop out of college, get married, and pop out their first child...all before their twenty-fifth birthday.

Yeah. You heard that correctly. Twenty-five.Two. Five.

Even my younger sister, though luckier in the love department than I have been so far, is behind our mom’s schedule. She’s twenty-seven and has just now secured a ringfrom a man. And she’ll be twenty-eight when she walks down the aisle.

The horror!

After I graduated high school, I told Mom that I wanted to focus on my career. To wait a while before settling down. My mom humored me, allowing me to enroll in college to study English Literature.

Her prediction? That I'd meet my future husband by the end of my first semester, just like she had done.

When this didn't happen, my mother held onto hope. I went to graduate school and got my MFA in Creative Writing. My mother saw this as more of a hobby than anything — nothing like a real career, no matter how much I told her that I was serious about making writing my full-time job.

When I finished grad school, my left ring finger was still bare and lonely. That's when my mother's hints about settling down became significantly less hint-like. She began sending me social media profiles of her friends' sons—eligible bachelors!—and names of online dating apps that I should try.

It was clear at that point that my mom was serious about getting me “married off.” But I grew up with my mom; I'm used to her way of poking and prodding my sister and me through life.

But while I was able to ignore my mother's cruel remarks about my spinsterhood before, when she took aim at my fertility, it began to really hurt. And ever since Alyssa got engaged, my mom's been worse than ever.

“What about Eric?” she asks, stabbing a piece of her salad with more aggression than seems necessary.

“Eric?” I laugh. “You mean mybossEric?”

“Yeah! He seems so sweet. I really liked him when I met him at the Summer Picnic.”

“I'm sure you did,” I reply.

OfcourseMom likes Eric. On paper, he's exactly the kind of man she wants me to

settle down with. He's handsome and, more importantly, financially successful. A guy like Eric could give me anything that money can buy.

Too bad what I want isn't something that can be purchased. But even if I was interested in Eric, the idea that my serious and stoic boss would be interested in me romantically is...comical.

"Seriously, Mom?" Alyssa chimes in. "Eric Stone? Ew."

"Not ew," our mom replies sternly. "What exactly is 'ew' about Eric? I thought he was a perfectly fine man when I met him last summer."

"Gag," Alyssa says. "Sure he's easy on the eyes I guess. And when it comes to money he's loaded, that's obvious. But Mom, Eric is a weirdo."

"He is not," she says.

"Yes, he is," I reply, looking at Alyssa appreciatively.

Even though our mom never misses the opportunity to compare us to one another, Alyssa and I have always been a united front, always supportive of one another and ready to defend the other one from the wrath of our judgmental mom.

"Total weirdo," Alyssa says authoritatively. "Like, a nerd. Just obsessed with his work."

"Obsession isn't a bad thing," Mom replies stiffly. "A man with ambition is a man who can provide for a wife and family."

"I can't even imagine Eric with a family," I reply, thinking of my boss. An image of him comes to mind, Eric in a suit, standing in the middle of his office, a

contemptuous frown on his face as he holds a crying, squirming baby at arm's length.

“Well, you better figure something out quickly,” Mom says dryly. “You’re not getting any younger. Your eggs won’t last forever, you know. Especially with all of your...medical issues.”

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“Mom!” Alyssa gasps.

I’m already standing up, pushing my chair in and pulling my jacket over my shoulders.

“Well, this has been great,” I say brightly, smiling at my mom from across the table. “So glad I came out to brunch with you and caught up! Great use of my Sunday morning!”

“What are you doing? You’re not leaving yet,” Mom says, raising a thin brow. “Sit down.”

“Nope,” I say. “Despite what you seem to think, I’m a grown woman and I’m allowed to do whatever I want to do, whenever I want. Including leaving when you bring up my ‘eggs,’ something I’ve asked you to do again and again.”

“Rebecca, don’t be so dramatic. Sit down. People are looking at us.”

I shake my head, opening my purse to find some cash. There’s no way I’m going to let my mother buy my meal. I’ll never hear the end of it: About how I ditched her at a brunch that she so generously paid for.

“Rebecca, stop this. You’re being ridiculous.”

I throw a couple of twenties on the table and walk away. I need to get away from my mother as soon as possible, before the tears begin to fall.

Eric

Holiday parties are my least favorite activity at Stone Enterprises. An excuse for everyone to get drunk and say things they should never say in a professional environment.

I blame Elijah. He's the one who insists on the damn things, saying they bring the company "closer" or some bullshit like that.

I don't need to be close to my employees. I need to get my work done, and that's it.

Being an owner of the company, it's my duty to show up to these social gatherings. I always make a brief appearance, then duck out early to go upstairs to my office.

With the rest of the company occupied with the party downstairs, it's all but guaranteed that I'll be left alone. Unbothered. The way that I like it.

My office floor is unlike the others at Stone Enterprises. We do research on this floor, after all. So instead of looking like a typical office floor with cubicles, desks, and computers everywhere, it looks more like a lab.

Except for my private office. Password protected and located in the quietest corner, it's my fortress. The only people allowed in here are myself, my brothers, and my executive assistant.

I ascend to my floor in the elevator, looking forward to getting away from the loud and boisterous party below. But when I arrive and begin walking to my office, I can already tell that my plans of being alone and getting work done aren't going to pan out.

I hear voices. Drunk voices, from the sound of it.

“Fuck off. I don’t like you that way.”

“Why’d you invite me here if you weren’t into me?”

“I didn’t invite you! You followed me!”

My blood turns to ice. That female voice is none other than my assistant, Rebecca.

“Don’t act like you don’t want me. I know you. You sleep around. Hell, you’re even sleeping with your boss.”

“I’m not sleeping with my boss. What the fuck?”

“You’re a lying slut. I’ve seen the way he looks at you. What’s he have that I don’t have? Money? I have money. Tell me how much, I’ll write you a check right now.”

“Get away from me, asshole!”

I’ve heard enough. I charge into my office. My vision is a blur, only focused on one thing, one person. When I see Rebecca sandwiched between my bookshelf and the asshole who followed her up here, turning her face away in disgust as he tries to kiss her, instinct kicks in. I’ve got him on the floor within seconds, my foot on his chest.

“No!”

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I ignore Rebecca's fearful shouting, digging my foot into the man's chest harder.

"What's your name?" I ask.

"Larry," he pants.

"Last name?"

"Welch," he says through a gasp of air.

"Larry Welch, you're not allowed in this building or anywhere near it from here on."

"I work here," he gasps.

He does? I look at his face closely. He looks vaguely familiar. Someone from the marketing department, I think.

"You worked here," I say to him. "Now you don't."

"You can't fire me -"

I pull him up and throw him backwards. He lands against the door, the framed photos on the walls rattling loudly.

"Let's get one thing clear," I say to him. "This company is mine. I can do whatever the fuck I want. Including ruining your miserable life, if you keep pushing it. Getting fired is a mild consequence compared to what I want to do to you right now."

Understand me?"

The man's thin face has gone white. He nods furiously, eyes wide.

Grabbing him by the arms, I turn him around so that he's facing Rebecca, who's cowered behind my desk.

"Apologize."

"I'm sorry," Larry says quickly.

"I'm sorry for being a pathetic sack of shit," I prompt him, giving him a painful nudge in the back with my fist. "Say it."

"I'm...I'm sorry for being a sack of shit."

"Apathetic sack of shit," I correct him, giving him another sharp nudge in the back.

"I'm sorry for being apathetic sack of shit," he whimpers.

"I'll never come anywhere near you again," I continue. "Say it. The whole thing, or I'll make you start over."

"I'll never come anywhere near you again," he says quickly.

I look at Rebecca, who's staring at me in horror.

Have I scared her?

Good. She should be scared. Scared enough to take steps in the future to protect herself from risk. It's not her fault that men like Larry exist. Pigs like him have

always been around, always will be. But she needs to learn how to protect herself.

What if I hadn't been here tonight? Then what?

I don't even want to think about it. My blood is already ice in my veins. I try to push the thoughts out of my head, to discard the what-ifs that are coming to mind.

I was here tonight to save her. That's what matters.

"I'm going to escort this thing downstairs," I say, giving Larry one last nudge in the back. He groans in pain, trying to twist out of my grip. "You—stay in my office and wait for me to return. I have some words for you as well."

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Rebecca

Eric is gone for what feels like a long time. My mind is racing. And the glasses of wine that I had downstairs at the party isn't helping with my paranoid thinking.

What's taking Eric so long? What's he doing?

Maybe Eric is going to kill that guy and that's why it's taking so long. He's hiding the body.

I try to shake the thought from my mind. I know it's a ridiculous supposition...but then, I've never seen Eric look so angry before.

Never seen him use his body in that way, in a physical altercation. His eyes were blazing with unfiltered hatred and disgust when he looked at Larry.

Violence is surprising from a man like Eric, my ordinarily calm and collected boss of seven years. Eric is a brainiac, an egghead, with his nose in books constantly.

But the way he took that man down, overpowered him and wrestled him to the ground, and then dictated an apology while holding him up to me like a weightless puppet...

I squeeze my thighs together, shifting atop the leather couch in Eric's office.

What the hell? Am I actually turned on right now?

A man trapped and attacked me less than half an hour ago!

Yeah...and then a different man came to my rescue.

A man who happens to be my boss. A man who, prior to tonight, had never deviated from his emotionless, monotone, all-business attitude long enough to even crack a joke, much less exhibit the kind of uncontrolled fury that he showed just now.

Yeah. Maybe I am turned on right now.

Or...maybe I'm just drunk, emotionally overwhelmed, and need to get the hell out of here before I embarrass myself even more than I already have.

I glance at the clock on the wall and see it's been almost forty-five minutes since Eric took Larry downstairs. Standing, I exit Eric's office and walk to the elevator. Just when I'm about to press the button, the brass double doors part and Eric steps out, a serious expression on his face. The fire behind his eyes has calmed slightly, not quite the out-of-control bonfire from before, but still a roaring flame.

"I told you to stay and wait for me," he says, his jaw clenched.

"You were gone for a long time," I say. "I thought you forgot."

Eric looks at me closely, his brow furrowed. He's close enough to me right now that I can see every individual jet black eyelash framing his hazel eyes. Why have I never noticed how beautiful his eyes are before? Have I really worked with him for this long and never noticed?

He swallows hard, Adam's apple rising and falling, taking me in from head to toe. I shift beneath his gaze. I can't decide if I feel turned on, fearful, or both.

“How many drinks have you had?” he finally asks.

“I’m not sure,” I confess. “Not too many, though.”

“Enough to impair your speech,” he replies. “You’re slurring.”

“I am?” I ask, paying attention to the way my tongue feels as I articulate the words.

If I’m slurring my speech, I can’t tell. Sure, I had a few drinks tonight, but not nearly enough to be drunkenly slurring my words. I’m not stupid; I know how to handle my alcohol, especially at a professional event.

Suddenly, I remember my doctor’s words earlier this week as she prescribed me a new medication: Don’t drink alcohol while you’re taking this.

Shit. I forgot. No wonder it feels like the floor is spinning. It’s not the alcohol to blame, it’s the alcohol interacting with the medicine! Maybe that’s also why tonight I’m finding my grouchy and antisocial boss so incredibly attractive. Because there’s no way that my body would be responding to him if I was sober.

Absolutely no way.

Right?

“Yes,” Eric says flatly. “You’re slurring. And you seem off balance, like you’re going to fall down. You shouldn’t drink so much, especially at an office event. You represent me and my department at Stone Enterprises when you show up to these functions. If you can’t behave, then don’t attend them at all.”

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His words sting, a harsh reprimand from my boss. And suddenly I'm about to cry again for the second time this week, this time with the added humiliation of doing so in front of my cold, emotionless boss.

"For your information," I say, wiping away a tear and looking away from him. "I didn't even drink that much tonight. It's just that I started this new medicine recently, and I'm not supposed to be drinking with it. I forgot. That's all."

Eric raises his brows, his anger fading into concern.

"What medication?"

I give him the name, and I can practically see him scanning his mental encyclopedia. With his heavy work in medical technology, there's a good chance he's already aware of the medication in question. Hell, maybe he even wrote a patent for it. The man has hundreds of them.

"You shouldn't drink with medication like that," he says darkly. "You're going to damage your liver."

"Stop with the lecture," I groan. "Please? It was an accident. It's already done, I can't undo it. I'll be fine."

"You will," he agrees. "Because I'm going to make sure of it. Come on."

Eric

Rebecca is growing more intoxicated by the minute.

“You know what’s dumb?” she slurs, saying the words to nobody in particular. “Why does everyone think once a woman turns thirty, her life is over? Why is that?”

“I don’t know,” I say quietly.

My driver glances curiously back at me in the rearview mirror. I shake my head, pressing a button nearby to raise the partition between the back seat and the front.

“Nobody says stuff like that about guys,” Rebecca continues, her words running together. “Guys play the field and focus on their career and nobody cares! But if you’re a woman you’re supposed to get married. Have babies. Wear aprons-n-hills.”

“Wear what?” I repeat.

“Aprons...and...heels,” she repeats, pronouncing each word carefully. “Aprons. And. Heels.”

It’s alarming how intoxicated she is right now. I can’t stop thinking about what would have happened to her if I hadn’t come upstairs when I did.

That fucker Larry Welch was going to take advantage of her. I ball my fists by my sides.

If Rebecca hadn’t been waiting for me upstairs, Welch would have gotten a much worse punishment at my hands. As it is, he might need a few stitches for the busted lip that I gave him in the parking garage. Maybe an ice pack for the deep purple bruise around his eye that he’ll be sporting tomorrow morning.

When he finally stopped crying like a little bitch, Welch said he'd be pressing charges against me for assault. What a fucking joke. I'd like to see him try. My lawyers would bury him—that is, if I didn't do it myself first.

I'd bury him. And I'd enjoy doing it.

If I see him anywhere near Rebecca ever again, he's a dead man. That's what I told him as my security team dragged him away.

"Aprons and heels," I repeat. "Heels, like high heeled shoes?"

The car makes a sharp right turn and she loses her balance, tumbling into my lap.

I flinch at the unexpected touch. Generally, I'm not a fan of physical contact. Handshakes are fine. Hugs from family members are tolerable.

Sex? Sex is fine...as long as I'm in control.

Glossy black hair spills across my lap. The smell of it hits my nostrils, vanilla and spice. Like a chai latte, like apple pie, like...home.

Home.

That's the kind of smell that it is. I can't even place it, exactly. It's the kind of elusive scent that calls back to vague memories from childhood, happier times, cozy autumn days and the crisp pages of a newly borrowed library book. It's the smell of hope and comfort.

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“Sorry,” Rebecca mumbles, putting a hand on my thigh to push away from me.

She starts to sit back up and retreat to her side of the back seat. I don’t know what the hell comes over me, but I put an arm around her, holding her against my chest. I bring my other hand to her chin, tipping her face up at mine.

Her eyes look unfocused and lost, and her cheeks are flushed.

“You did a foolish thing tonight,” I say to her. “Mixing your medication with alcohol.”

“It was an accident.”

“I know,” I say. “But you could have been hurt. I don’t like that.”

“It won’t happen again.”

“You’re right,” I agree. “It won’t. I won’t allow it.”

She looks confused, like she doesn’t quite know what I’m saying. I don’t know what I’m saying either. Even though I didn’t have a drop to drink tonight and never do, I feel a little intoxicated myself. Intoxicated by what? By her? Why?

“Why did you even talk to a man like that?” I ask her.

“A man like who?”

“Larry Welch,” I say.

She frowns.

“I don’t know,” she says. “We were just...talking. He was nice. I gave him my phone number and we were planning to go out next weekend. It’s not like I knew that he would follow me upstairs. I had no idea that he’d turn out to be such a creep.”

“But why did you give him your number?” I press. “Why did you agree to go out with him next weekend?”

She looks completely confused now.

“I don’t understand,” she says. “What do you mean? Are you asking why I...why I date?”

I think about this and realize that I don’t really know what the hell I’m asking.

Ordinarily I’m so careful with words, calculating what I say before I say it. But tonight it’s like my mind is just as scrambled as hers.

“Forget it,” I say, shaking my head.

She’s already forgotten, though. Slurring her words with the memory of a goldfish, she’s a hazard to her own safety tonight. Now she’s singing softly to herself, fiddling with the hem of her dress, as if she doesn’t realize I’m still here.

By the time we make it to my house a few minutes later, she’s passed out, completely limp in my arms.

Knowing that what I’m doing violates all kinds of employee guidelines and crosses a

line that can't be uncrossed, I carry her upstairs, passing several guest rooms and heading to the master bedroom instead.

I know I won't be able to sleep tonight, anyway. I need to know that she's safe.

For some damn reason, I need to see to her safety personally, watching over her tonight instead of calling someone to help.

Sacrificing my sleep to care for her. It makes no sense. But that's exactly what I do.

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Rebecca

Silk sheets. Who the hell owns silk sheets?

Not me, that's for sure. I get paid reasonably well at Stone Enterprises, but not enough to keep me in five hundred dollar bedding. I wish.

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Frowning, I slide out of bed and step onto the lush carpeted floor. The room I'm in is blank, empty, as though the owner of this place never bothered to fully move in. A single chair is against the wall next to me, pointed towards the bed.

Where the hell am I?

I wipe the sleep from my eyes and try to remember what happened last night. My head is pounding. Everything is a fog. The last thing I remember clearly is listening to some guy's boring golf stories at the open bar, sipping on a glass of wine and watching the other women dancing on the dance floor, wishing I had their confidence.

And what else happened? There has to be more. Obviously there's more if I went home with a guy last night.

But every time I try to remember anything further from last night, my head pounds even harder.

I don't know how much I drank last night. But however much it was, it was far too much. Never again. Never, ever again. With everything else going on in my life, a drunken hookup with a guy from work is the last thing I need right now.

When I look down I realize I'm wearing an oversized white t-shirt that falls to my knees. It's soft to the touch, the kind of softness that you only get from a t-shirt that's truly "vintage" — worn and torn, having been through a thousand cycles in the washer and dryer.

The lettering across the front is faded and cracked. I tug the shirt out from my chest a little, trying to read the letters upside down.

JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY

Wait.

Oh no.

No.

No no no no no no. This can't be.

The bedroom door swings open. Eric Stone, my boss, walks in wearing nothing but a pair of gray sweatpants. Nothing else. No shirt. And by the looks of the prominent bulge beneath the gray fabric of his sweatpants, no underwear either.

"You're awake. Good."

"What the fuck?" I shriek.

Ouch. The volume of my own voice sends a new wave of pain rebounding between my temples. I wince, closing my eyes and backing away to sit down on the bed.

"Yeah, you're going to feel like that all morning," Eric says, his deep voice quiet and stern. "You basically poisoned your organs last night."

"And yet you still brought me back to your place," I say, opening my eyes to glare at him. "Was I even coherent? Or does that not matter to you?"

"You think we slept together?" he asks, his voice hardening.

“Well, didn’t we?” I ask, waving a hand at myself, the bed, and him.

“No,” he replies. “We didn’t sleep together. Unlike your date last night, I’m not into taking advantage of vulnerable women. I brought you back here last night because you would have endangered yourself if I’d left you alone.”

I think about this.

“You could have called me an Uber,” I say, raising my gaze to look up at him.

“You think it would have been better to put you, blackout drunk, in a car with a complete stranger and trust them to get you home?” he asks. “Even if you made it home, last I checked, Uber drivers don’t walk you to your door, pour you a glass of water, and make sure you get to your bed.”

Taking a deep breath, I consider this. It all makes sense...I think.

“Why am I in different clothes?” I ask, pulling the bottom of the shirt lower on my thighs. “Where’s my dress?”

“In the garbage,” he answers. “You were very sick last night, Rebecca. I don’t think you’re going to want that dress back. I’ll just leave it at that.”

“So...so I changed my clothes,” I say hopefully, looking at him. “You gave me a shirt and I cleaned myself up and changed.

He shakes his head.

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“No? You changed my clothesforme?” I ask weakly.

“You’d rather I let you sleep in a soiled dress?”

I fold my arms over my chest, conscious that without a bra my nipples must be clearly showing through the thin white shirt.

“Nothing sexual happened between you and me last night,” Eric continues. “I brought you home. I took care of you overnight. That’s it.”

Took care of me overnight.

I look at his face and see the shadows beneath his eyes.

“Did you sleep?”

“Very little.”

“And you slept...beside me?” I ask in a small voice. “In the bed?”

He shakes his head and points a finger at the wooden straight-backed chair next to the bed.

“You slept inthat?”I ask, blinking at it.

“Like I said, very little,” he answers grimly. “I wanted to be alert in case you got sick again.”

I can't look at him anymore. The shame of getting so drunk last night, of my boss witnessing me in a state like that, throwing up on myself...and then him changing my clothes and babysitting me all night long...

It's too much humiliation to bear.

"You didn't need to do all of that," I whisper.

"I don't think you understand the seriousness of what happened last night," Eric growls.

I sigh and look at him.

"I do understand," I say. "And I'm very sorry. It won't happen again, you have my word. I don't know what came over me...normally I'm fine after two or three glasses of wine..."

Eric tilts his head.

"You don't remember much about last night, do you?"

"I guess not, if I had to ask you whether we slept together," I sigh.

Eric walks to the wooden chair, taking a seat and leaning forward to rest his elbows on his knees, interlacing his fingers and bowing his head.

It's a pose I'm very familiar with, having worked with the man for over seven years. It's the pose that Eric strikes when he's stuck on a difficult problem, deep in thought, and likely frustrated.

Over time, I've learned that it's wise not to interrupt Eric when he's in this mode, to

leave him alone and wait for him to speak again—even if this takes hours.

So instead of speaking, I just watch him, gazing at the wide expanse of his muscular shoulders, his rounded biceps...and the raised veins that wind from his thick forearms all the way to the backs of his large hands.

Eric has nice hands. How have I never noticed this before?

Finally he looks up at me.

“Why are you taking fertility medication?” he asks.

I blink at him.

“Excuse me?”

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“You didn’t get drunk from alcohol alone last night,” he continues. “You mixed alcohol with your medicine.”

Shit. Of course.

An out of focus scene from last night comes back to me. Eric and I, upstairs by the elevator. He asked me which medication I had taken and I told him.

And obviously a man who has made medical technology his life’s work would know what that medication is for.

Eric knows about things beyond medicine too. Reciting the scientific names of every flower and tree in the garden outside of our office building. The names of foreign diplomats and leaders, the precise dates of every significant historical event to ever happen...

That’s Eric. A walking, talking encyclopedia. And a certified genius when it comes to medicine.

I glance down at the faded Johns Hopkins shirt I’m wearing, his alma mater. He could probably return to that university, walk into any classroom at random, and teach the subject matter with ease.

My boss is brilliant. He has his faults, one of them being interpersonal relationships. But what he lacks in social skill, he makes up for in nearly every other domain. Smart. Ambitious. Successful. And now—thanks to his shirtless entrance this morning—I also know that the guy obviously works out.

A lot.

Add “amazing body” to this growing checklist of positive traits, and I guess my mother was right. Eric Stone is a catch. An unconventional catch, but a catch nonetheless.

And now he’s witnessed me throwing up and blacking out. Great. Just great.

“Rebecca. Why are you taking fertility medicine?” He repeats the question quietly.

“That’s a very personal question.”

“I think we’re past that, don’t you?” he asks, gesturing to me on the bed.

I cross my arms again over my chest, feeling so naked beneath the thin shirt.

“Are you trying to get pregnant?” he asks.

“Not...not currently,” I say.

Not currently. Because I’d have to have, you know, a guy in my life in order to get pregnant. And I don’t have one of those.

“But you’re preparing for it,” Eric says. “You’re preparing to get pregnant in the future.”

I sigh.

“I have...a medical condition,” I say. “I don’t want to get into it, okay? Please?”

My voice is nearly a whimper by the end and I know I won’t be able to say more

without breaking down.

I've already humiliated myself enough. Why add to that by crying to my boss about my problems? About how my odds of motherhood are lower with every passing year. About how I've been looking into sperm banks, just in case I never find a man to settle down with...

Spinster.

"I want you to help me understand," Eric says. "Because none of this makes any sense to me, Rebecca. No sense at all."

My face flushes and I blink back tears. This whole situation is surreal. Eric's bedroom, his t-shirt, him sitting across the bed from me and interrogating me about my private life...

"It doesn't matter if it makes sense to you," I reply softly. "It isn't any of your business."

"It becomes my business when you put yourself in danger," Eric shoots back, his jaw tensing. "You're preparing to get pregnant. And you're giving your phone number out to guys like Larry Welch."

"Who?"

"Exactly," he says darkly. "You don't even remember, do you? He followed you upstairs. He attacked you. If I hadn't gone up to my office when I did..."

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His whole body is tense now, his eyes dangerous, boring into me with so much intensity that I think I could catch fire right now from his gaze alone.

Bits and pieces of the night before are coming back to me. Finishing my last glass of wine. Giving Larry — the man with the boring golf stories — my phone number. Going to the elevator and being surprised when he slid between the closing doors at the last minute, an unsettling smile on his face.

He wouldn't leave me alone. He followed me all the way back to Eric's office, where I was trying to escape behind his heavy, lockable door.

"I didn't know he was like that," I mumble. "You're saying this as if I knew. I didn't know."

"I'm not blaming you," Eric replies. "You're right. You didn't know. And I plan to personally make sure that Welch never bothers you again. You have my word on that."

These words send a chill up my spine. I've never seen my boss like this. His body language exudes a quiet, controlled danger. As if he's thinking very carefully about what he is going to do to Larry Welch. And in a way, that's so much more threatening than if he were to just let it all out, to rant and rave.

Somehow, I know that Eric means what he says when he promises me that Larry Welch will never bother me again. I believe him completely, without question.

"What I want to know," Eric says. "Is why you're associating with men below your

rank.”

I blink at him.

“I’m sorry,” I say. “What?”

“Welch,” he says. “And the others. You dated that accountant for a while.”

“The accountant...” I wrack my tired brain, trying to remember an accountant that I dated. “I never dated an accountant.”

“Patrick Thorne,” he replies curtly.

I nearly laugh.

“Pat?” I repeat, recalling the awkward blind date that my sister set me up with. “I didn’t date Pat. I went on one date with him. Three years ago. How...how did you even remember that? I barely remember it myself.”

“I remember many things. You know this.”

“I do,” I agree. “It’s scary how much you’re able to keep in your head. But that’s different. That’s work related things, research, hobbies and interests. Important things. Why do you remember the name of a man I went on a single date with from three years ago?”

“You’re my assistant,” he says. “Why would remembering details about your life not be important to me?”

“Maybe because of your general disdain for anything you consider to be a waste of time,” I reply. “Things like going out on dates. Or company parties. Or...”

I trail off. I don't have another example. My head is pounding and the more that I talk, the more that I think about last night, the harder it pounds.

My boss is acting so out of character right now that I wonder if maybe I'm hallucinating. Maybe I'm actually still black out drunk, back at my own apartment, drooling onto the couch cushions in my living room. Maybe this is just a weird dream; a bad trip from a high I didn't intend to catch.

"We're getting off subject," Eric continues. "And I'm running out of time. I have a meeting in an hour."

"It's Sunday," I remind him.

"Yes," he agrees. "It's a Sunday meeting."

I press my palm to my pounding forehead and close my eyes.

"I was going to ease into this subject, but you and I both know that I'm no good at delicate communication," Eric says. "So I'll just say what's on my mind, and I'll leave you to think it over. You're on fertility medicine. I don't know all the details. I don't know the reason. All I know is that women don't take medication like that unless they're trying to induce ovulation."

I nod, my eyes still closed, both hands on my forehead now. Is this really happening? Is my boss really talking to me about my ovaries right now? Seriously?

"If you want to have a child, that's your business," he continues. "But as far as genetic material, you could find a lot better than some accountant schmuck. Or Larry fucking Welch."

What the hell is happening right now?

“These men are beneath you,” he says quietly. “Don’t reproduce with men who are beneath you in rank, who won’t be able to provide for you and the child.”

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“That’s easy for you to say,” I murmur. “You don’t even care about dating. You don’t know how hard it is, finding someone.”

“I’m sure I don’t,” he replies. “But this is why I want to make you an offer.”

My hands drop from my face, and I open my eyes to look at him. He’s staring back at me, his gaze hard and unwavering.

“An offer,” I repeat flatly.

“Yes,” he says. “Last night, you spoke to me a lot. I doubt you remember.”

“What did I speak to you about?” I ask, although I’m not sure I can handle the humiliating answer.

“You talked a lot about your mother and her expectations of you,” he says. “About your younger sister recently getting engaged. About your job, working for me these last seven years. Your dreams of doing something else, of writing novels instead. And finally, you spoke to me about wanting to be a mother.”

I hold my breath.

“I can’t solve all these problems for you,” he continues. “Your mother, for instance. She is who she is, Rebecca, and you shouldn’t listen to the advice of a woman who is so personally miserable. She doesn’t know the first thing about happiness.”

“What did I tell you about my mother last night?” I ask in horror.

“It doesn’t matter,” Eric says. “My point is, some of your problems aren’t things I can do something about. But I can do something about a couple of them. Specifically two: your dream of being a writer, and your desire to be a mother.”

What the hell is he talking about?

“You have a need,” he continues. “So do I. I think we can help one another.”

“Eric,” I shake my head, and then quickly regret doing so when it begins to pound again. “I need you to get to the point. I don’t understand what you’re saying. I mean, it sounds like you want me to have your baby.”

I laugh at the ridiculousness of this, feeling embarrassed for even saying it aloud. But then I realize that Eric isn’t laughing.

“Wait...” I begin.

“If you want a child, I can make that happen for you,” he says. “Even better, I can provide for you both, and be a good father. You can quit your job. Stay at home with the baby as much as you like. We can hire some help, too. You would have time to write novels, to do whatever it is you want to do.”

“This is insane,” I breathe, hardly believing the words I’m hearing from my boss right now.

“It’s unconventional,” he replies. “But then again, maybe not. Arranged marriages are normal in many cultures.”

“What? You didn’t mention marriage,” I say, sitting up straighter. “I thought you were only talking about a baby.”

“Children need their mother and father,” he says. “A stable home, a unified family. It’s what’s best for their development. This is a proven fact. I intend to give my children the best.”

“Children,” I repeat. “Children means more than one, Eric. Plural.”

“Yes. I’m aware,” he says. “Maybe I’m getting ahead of myself. How many children do you want to have? I have always imagined having four.”

“Four,” I sputter, rising from the bed and pacing towards the door. “Four children? We’re not even...this isn’t...”

I trail off, turning on my heel to look at Eric. He looks at me impassively from the chair, his fingers still interlaced. If he’s joking—and Eric never jokes—I can’t tell.

“You’re serious,” I say faintly. “You’re seriously proposing that we get married and have children.”

“And you’d switch careers,” he reminds me. “You’d be able to write.”

“Right. I’d be able to write. That’s probably the least crazy part of this proposal,” I laugh. “Eric, I don’t know if you realize what you’re saying.”

“I do,” he says. “I thought about it all night. It’s the best way to resolve things. Both of us get what we need.”

“Right. You said you have a need, but you didn’t say what that need is,” I reply. “What do you get out of this proposal?”

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Eric rises, walking to the closet door and opening it. He disappears inside and I hear the shuffling of hangers on the rack as he looks for his clothes.

“It’s obvious what I get from this,” he says from within the closet. “A wife and children. Believe it or not, Rebecca, I want those things. Most men do. It’s a very natural desire.”

He emerges from the closet with a bundle of clothing in his arms, tossing it on the bed beside me. Then he begins to strip off his sweatpants.

“Please,” I say, averting my eyes and shielding them with a hand. “Do you need me to leave the room, or something?”

“Like I said earlier,” Eric replies. “I think we’re beyond that at this point. I’ve seen everything of yours now. You’re free to look at me. It may help you make your decision about my proposal.”

I peel my hand away from my eyes and look at Eric, careful to keep my eyes above his waist. I’m checking for a sign of sarcasm in his expression, sure that he must be making a joke now.

He’s not.

But I can’t help it; I break out into full belly laughs now, nearly falling back on the bed. And then I wince when my head erupts again with pounding, searing pain between my temples.

“This is some hangover,” I groan, closing my eyes.

“You’re dehydrated,” he says. “I’ll make a call to my doctor. He can come by, do an IV vitamin drip.”

“A what?”

Eric pulls on his clothes—a pair of dark jeans and a white t-shirt that hugs the curves of his muscular chest and shoulders and looks like it would be soft to touch.

“IV vitamin drip,” he answers. “Replenishes your fluids, vitamins, and so on. It’s the fastest way to recover from a hangover.”

“Oh, hell no,” I groan. “No needles. I’ll stick with the coffee method of hangover recovery. Thanks though.”

“Your decision,” he says. “So Rebecca. I take it that your laughter just now means that you’re not interested in my proposal?”

I look at him.

“I’m sorry,” I say. “I’m just...I want all of those things. I do. But with the right person. A person I love, and who loves me back. I don’t want some kind of...some kind of emotionless arrangement.”

I’m careful to say this rejection in a kind way, not wanting to hurt his feelings. When I look at Eric, I can’t read his expression. But that’s nothing new; I can never read my boss’s expression. He keeps his emotions—if he has any emotions at all—locked away, deep inside, far away from me and others.

“Understood,” he says simply.

And just like that, he drops the idea just as suddenly as he brought it up in the first place.

He turns and walks to the door, opening it. Before he steps out, he looks back at me and I think he's about to bring the proposal back up again, say something to try to convince me.

Weirdly, I kind of want him to. I'm on the edge of desperation, the bittersweet milestone of my thirtieth birthday still fresh in my mind, and Eric paints a very pretty picture on nearly every front...except that it's a picture that doesn't include love.

And I want love. Need love. How do you marry a man who doesn't love you? Have a child with a man who doesn't love you?

No matter how badly I want to begin trying for a baby, to outpace my dysfunctional biological clock, I'm not sure I want it badly enough to go through with a plan like his.

But if he could offer me something, anything, to show me that I'm more to him than a vessel to fulfill his own dreams of fatherhood, then maybe I could consider it.

"There's an espresso machine downstairs," he says. "Orange juice in the refrigerator. Help yourself to anything you want. I've left my driver's number on a note on the counter. Call him when you're ready to leave, and he'll take you wherever you need to go."

"Okay," I say faintly.

He looks at me for a few seconds longer and I think he might say something else. Instead, he gives me a curt nod and closes the door behind him.

7

Eric

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I idlen in the driveway for a while, replaying the last hour in my mind. It's good that I have a meeting this morning. It turned out to be a good excuse for a quick exit, in case she turned me down.

Which she did.

Maybe I should have known better than to take her drunk ramblings last night to heart. I don't know what came over me. Lust for Rebecca and her curves, maybe, or the words of my older brothers from days ago, about my potential to be a father one day, the stage in life they're both entering while I remain firmly behind, trailing behind them in life as I always seem to do.

I've spent most of my life with my head down in books, studying, researching, and inventing. With Elijah and Emmett, we've built an empire that is guaranteed to outlive ourselves. And maybe that's the only legacy I need to leave, the only mark I need to make on this world.

Maybe.

But I want more. And after last night, I can't seem to look at Rebecca in quite the same way.

It's not as if I haven't noticed her beauty before. It's obvious to anyone who looks at her. It's the reason I made her move her office next to mine, away from the rest of the staff, so that they could actually get some work done and stop eyeing her like candy.

Maybe I've always felt as though I have ownership over her. She's been with me for

seven years, my faithful assistant, my right hand at the office who never fails me.

I wasn't surprised to learn last night that she doesn't like her job all that much. But what I didn't know is that she has something else she wants, a completely different path in life that she always meant to take after graduating college.

Instead she came to work for me at the tender age of twenty-three, pouring herself into her work, giving in to my demands, stretching to meet my high bar.

Before she came to Stone Enterprises, my assistant position was a revolving door of rejects who either left voluntarily because they couldn't handle working for me, or who were eventually fired.

Then she came along.

As beautiful back then as she is now. Slightly afraid of me, although that fear is long gone by now. Now she's the only person in my office with the backbone to stand up to me. To tell me that I'm making a mistake, that I'm wrong. She's saved my ass more than once due to this, always telling me the truth while the yes-men around me pretended to overlook my errors.

She has my respect. A hard thing to earn. And she has my trust, as well.

Who better to marry? Who better to raise children with?

It's a solid foundation, better than most start out with. But she thinks she needs something more than this. She thinks she needs love. Something I'll never be able to promise her.

How the hell can I promise to love, when I've never loved a woman before?

It's not as though I don't know what love is. I suspect it's just different for me. I feel love differently. And I express it differently, much to the frustration of those around me.

I feel love for my family. My brothers, my niece...even my unborn nephew.

And if I ever have children, I'll love them too. But that's a different kind of love. Family love. Automatic love.

Falling in love with a woman is...different. A gradual process that occurs with time, if you're lucky. I've never been able to get into dating. The demands of romantic relationships are too much.

Maybe if I married a woman, I would eventually love her.

But maybe not.

I can promise Rebecca a lot of things. But I can't promise love. I just can't.

"You look like shit."

"Thanks. You too."

"Yeah, you're probably right. I was up all night again with Ellie."

"Right."

I look away from my oldest brother and gaze around the room. This quaint restaurant isn't our usual meeting place, but it's closer to Elijah's house than our downtown offices are.

Lately, Elijah has this thing about working on weekends. He prefers not to do it at all if he can avoid it, no longer the workaholic he once was before he met his wife. And if we have to have a work meeting on a weekend, he demands that we meet somewhere closer to his house, so he doesn't have to drive far or be gone from his family for long.

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And I get it. I do. But right now, I don't want to talk to Elijah about his daughter. It's just another unwelcome reminder that my brothers are both married men, both becoming dads, and I'm...not.

A flash of Rebecca from this morning runs through my mind, only it's not an image based in reality. Instead, it's a scene that didn't happen, a scene where Rebecca said yes. And then we quickly got to work making a baby, right there on my bed.

I was prepared to do it.

Prepared to get started this morning, if she was feeling up to it.

Fucking her this morning would serve two purposes. Filling her with my seed, the first time of many if we were to try for a baby together....and at the same time, finally taking care of the erection I'd been battling back all morning long as we talked in my bedroom.

Sure, I saw her naked last night. But that was different. It wasn't sexual. I was caretaking, washing her up and changing her into clean clothes, making sure she made it to bed, taking care of her when she woke up several times throughout the night.

But this morning? When she woke up, her hair all messy, face bare of any makeup, my favorite shirt draped over her curves?

I fucking wanted her.

“Her new tooth finally came through,” Elijah says. “So hopefully things will improve soon.”

“How did the call with Pete go?” I ask, wanting to get off the topic as soon as possible.

Emmett arrives as I ask the question, late by fifteen minutes, as usual. He looks from one of us to the other.

“Okay,” he says slowly, turning to look at me. “I know why Elijah looks half-dead. But what’s up with you?”

“What are you talking about?” I ask.

“You look like shit.”

“I’ve been told,” I reply, running a hand through my hair.

“You okay?”

“Fine.”

Emmett glances at Elijah.

“You don’t look fine,” Emmett says. “What’s the deal? Did you drink too much at the party last night?”

His words strike a chord. It’s been a long time since alcohol has been even remotely tempting to me. It’s not Emmett’s fault. My brothers don’t know how low I once fell. I was in college, lost in the long shadows that they both cast over my life, struggling to form connections to others.

Social connection just came so naturally to everyone else. But not for me. Never for me.

I tried. Oh, I tried. For a while I had plans. I would find a girlfriend and tie the knot after we graduated. We'd have kids. We'd settle down.

Normal. We would be normal.

I would be normal.

But changing myself was hard. Going to parties, struggling to make idle conversation with people, to connect with them on an emotional level.

Alcohol helped. It lowered my inhibitions. Made jokes funnier, made small talk easier.

I was still awkward, constantly second guessing myself. What is this person feeling? What does that smile mean? If I say this, is that okay? What did they mean when they said that?

But even though I still second guessed myself, it was easier. Calmer. No anxiety, no fear.

Alcohol helped. Until one day, it didn't anymore. It spiraled out of control. Eventually, I didn't know how to function without it, liquor being the fuel that kept me going, kept me forcing myself out of my comfort zone, exhausting myself mentally trying to squeeze myself into a mold that didn't fit.

Realizing it was ruining me, I quit drinking cold turkey. The drinking and the socializing. Because I couldn't seem to do one without the other.

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All of this happened in my first year of college, all without my brothers knowing a thing about it. When I came home for the summer, their familiar robotic brother was just as he had always been. Maybe a little more reclusive, a little older looking, but still Robot Eric all the same.

“I don’t drink,” I snap at Emmett. “You know that.”

“Sorry,” Emmett shrugs. “I figured you must be hungover or something, with the way you look right now. What’s up?”

“Nothing is up. Fuck off.”

Emmett’s eyes widen. Even Elijah looks surprised, looking up from his cell phone screen to scrutinize my face. I look away from them both, irritation growing by the second.

“Eric, if you -”

I cut Elijah off before he can finish the sentence.

“I need to take a piss,” I mutter, standing up abruptly. “When I come back, let’s review your phone call with Pete so we can move on with the contract details.”

My eyes scan for the restroom sign. When I spot it around a corner, I make a beeline for it, darting through the tables and chairs. But I stop when I hear a familiar feminine voice from behind a partition to my right.

“I don’t know, Mom,” Rebecca says weakly. “Does it matter?”

“Perhaps if you went back to the gym,” another woman says. Her voice is stiff yet melodic, the way a news anchor’s voice might be. It’s also way too loud, almost as though she wants to be overheard. “Did some cardio, maybe.”

“I already go to yoga twice a week,” Rebecca mumbles.

“And I think that’s wonderful, dear,” the woman continues. “But are you working up a sweat with your little yoga class? Do you get your heart rate up? You know you need to get your heart rate up for at least thirty minutes to -”

“To burn fat,” Rebecca sighs. “Thanks, I know that. You’ve only said it to me a thousand times a year since I was thirteen.”

“Well, I’m just saying,” the woman replies. “Maybe if you put in a little more effort, you’d have more luck attracting a man.”

“Mom!” Rebecca says. “There’s more to life than finding a man. Have you ever considered that?”

“Of course there’s more to life than finding a man,” Rebecca’s mother replies. “There’s also motherhood.”

“Please stop talking about this. Please.”

My gut clenches. Rebecca sounds like she’s about to cry, her voice thin and strained.

I don’t think about what I do next. Rounding the partition, I find Rebecca sitting at a small table, facing me. Her eyes catch mine immediately. Rebecca’s mother turns to see what she’s looking at, and when she spots me, her frozen face breaks out into the

broadest grin that her Botox will allow her.

“Well, Mr. Stone,” she says, her news anchor voice growing even louder in volume. “What a surprise to bump into you here!”

I take a step forward, giving her a firm shake of the hand.

“Not a surprise,” I reply without thinking. “Didn’t Rebecca tell you? She asked me to join you today.”

Her mother looks back at Rebecca, who is turning bright pink, her shoulders stiff. I drape an arm around her and look back at her mom.

“I felt it would be good to formally introduce myself,” I clarify. “Or, re-introduce myself. You see, your daughter and I are dating.”

The woman looks from me to Rebecca.

“Is this true?” she asks, her Cheshire grin still frozen in place. “Mr. Stone and you? Dating?”

I pull Rebecca towards me, giving her a kiss on her forehead.

“Wow,” her mother says. “She never mentioned it to me. How long has this been going on?”

“A few months,” I answer, and I sense Rebecca glancing up at me in my periphery. “I apologize for the secrecy...we wanted to take the introductions slowly, considering our professional relationship. We know once the news is out, the office gossip will follow.”

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Rebecca's mother nods.

"Totally understand. Well, I'm so sorry we ate without you," she says, gesturing to the table of dirty dishes between us. "If I'd known you were coming..."

"It's fine," I say, rubbing my hand up and down Rebecca's back. "I got caught up with work this morning and lost track of time."

I look down at Rebecca.

"Sorry, honey," I say mechanically.

She glares at me, her body stiff.

"Oh, Rebecca don't hold it against the poor man," her mother chirps from across the table. "He runs a multi-billion dollar business after all! That's the price that you pay for dating an ambitious man."

Rebecca turns her glare to her mother now, only she doesn't seem to notice her daughter's expression.

"Well, I'd love to stay and chat," her mother says, glancing at her watch. "But I have a hair appointment in half an hour."

She brushes her fingertips over her fluffy white-blond hair.

"Another time," I say to her, shaking her hand again. "Great to meet you."

“Great to meet you,” she replies. She looks at Rebecca. “You take good care of this man, you understand?”

“Oh, I will!” she says icily, still glaring at me.

Her mother walks away. When she’s out of view, Rebecca pushes off of me and stands up, throwing her napkin on the table.

“What the hell was that?” she asks. “Why are you here? Did you...did you follow me here or something?”

“I didn’t follow you,” I reply. “I’m here for lunch. It’s just a coincidence. But then I heard your mom talking and -”

“And decided you’d force my hand?” she asks. “Decided you’d tell my mom we’re dating and that I’d just...what? Go along with your lie? For the rest of my life?”

I blink at her.

“I don’t understand what you mean,” I frown. “What do you mean, for the rest of your life?”

“I think you know what I mean,” she says, her hands on my hips. “You think if you lie to my mom, I’ll be forced to go along with the lie and take it as far as it’ll go. Get married. Have children. Just...live my whole life out as a lie all because you dropped in and told my mom a bunch of stories?”

“That wasn’t my plan at all, Rebecca. That’s crazy.”

“Yeah, well, sometimes you do crazy stuff,” she says. “I know you. And I also know that you like to get your way, like to be in control.”

“So you think I’m trying to force you to marry me,” I say. “You really believe I’d do that?”

“I don’t know,” she sighs. “I never understand what the hell you’re thinking, Eric. Never have, never will. But you just told my mom a lie and now I’m going to have to deal with the aftermath. What am I supposed to say to her next time she asks about you?”

“Tell her that we broke up,” I shrug.

She groans, sitting back down in her chair and putting her head in her hands.

“I’m trying to help,” I say to her. “Last night you told me that if you don’t find a boyfriend to take to your sister’s wedding, you’ll never live it down.”

“Last night,” she moans. “Last night I said a lot of stuff, didn’t I?”

“Yes,” I answer honestly.

She sits up and looks at me. The rims of her eyes are red, like she’s about to start crying. But instead, she starts to laugh.

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“What are you laughing about?” I ask her flatly.

“Just...this is so...”

She gestures towards me and begins laughing even harder.

I glance at the table in front of us, the half empty wine glass in the center of it.

“Have you been drinking again?” I ask, picking up the glass and sniffing it.

“Oh for the love of god,” she says, her laughter dying down. “You really think I’d forget a lesson like that so soon? I still have a headache from last night’s hell. That’s my mom’s drink, not mine.”

I put it back down on the table and then look at Rebecca.

“Last night you said your sister is getting married next weekend,” I say. “Is that accurate?”

“Yes,” she says. “I’m the Maid of Honor. The whole bridal party is wearing watermelon pink. But in case you’re concerned that people won’t be able to tell us apart, don’t worry. My sister’s taken care of that. Not only am I the fattest woman in the bridal party, I also have the unique privilege of getting to wear a matching feathered hairpiece. So I’ll definitely stand out.”

“You’d stand out anywhere, Rebecca,” I reply. “You’re beautiful.”

“Ha. That’s very flattering, Eric.”

“I don’t do flattery,” I say. “You know this. I’m telling you the truth. You are unusually beautiful.”

Rebecca watches me.

“You...you confuse me, Eric,” she admits.

“I confuse everyone,” I reply quietly. “Story of my life. I’m an asshole.”

“You’re not an asshole.”

“Now you’re relying to me,” I say.

“Okay, you’re sort of an asshole,” Rebecca shrugs and smiles. “But it’s...it’s never on purpose. You know? You’re an asshole by accident. Which is kind of the same thing as not being an asshole at all. Because assholes are the way that they are on purpose. You’re just...oblivious.”

I look away from her.

“You might get on my last nerve,” she continues, reaching for my hand. “But I’m learning that you’re also incredibly sweet. In your own misunderstood kind of way.”

“Sweet enough for you to reconsider my proposal this morning?” I ask her.

She frowns, shaking her head.

“No,” she says. “Sorry. But I’m still holding out for true love.”

“I understand,” I reply.

Because I do. I understand that she wants more than an arrangement. That to most, marriage is going to mean more than a mutually beneficial transaction.

“But...” she continues. “Since you’ve gotten me into a bit of a situation now with this lie you told my mom...I wouldn’t say no to a wedding date,” she says. “Are you free next weekend?”

8

Rebecca

“Oh, you all look so beautiful!”

Beautiful is the last word that I would use to describe the pink monstrosities that the bridesmaids and I are all wearing right now. But I bite my tongue.

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Today isn't about me or my opinions. It's about Alyssa and her special day. And I'll be damned if I'm going to open my mouth and say something to dampen her excitement. I'm not that kind of sister. She and I are a united front, a team. I'd do anything for her.

Including lie.

"I love the ruffles," I say, patting the mass of gauzy fabric bunched at the neckline. "They're really..."

I drift off, glancing at the other bridesmaids for help.

"Whimsical!" Peyton, a bridesmaid says brightly, her smile looking pained.

"Very whimsical," I agree.

Alyssa turns away from us and turns, looking at herself from all angles in the three paneled full length mirror.

"Do you think he'll like it?" She asks for the tenth time.

"Girl, when he sees you in that dress walking down the aisle towards him, he's going to be drooling," another bridesmaid pipes up. "Be careful. He might rip it right off of you, right there in front of the minister and everything!"

We laugh.

“Well you know he wants kids right away,” Peyton says to us with a wink. “What do you think? Should we take bets on whether they’ll have a honeymoon baby?”

Alyssa glances at me quickly. I’m not laughing along with the others, but I’ve got the best smile I can muster on my face, disguising the familiar pang of sadness that always hits me when other women talk about having babies.

They talk about it as though it’s easy. As though getting pregnant is as simple as snapping their fingers. It’s such a contrast to my own outlook. And the fact that I’m not able to indulge in the champagne in the bridal suite with the others another unwelcome reminder.

Imagine. A honeymoon baby. Getting married and getting pregnant right away, just like that, basically by accident. I could only dream. With my body, the only way to get pregnant is on purpose. Probably after spending a lot of money, and a lot of time in doctor’s offices.

“Oh, stop,” Alyssa says seriously, waving her hand at the other women. “I don’t want to talk about babies today. Seriously guys. Guys, enough.”

The laughing stops abruptly.

“Sorry, Lyss,” Peyton says with a bewildered look on her face. “I was just kidding around.”

“I know,” Alyssa says, glancing at me. “It’s just I’m so stressed out today...I’ve spent months planning this day. I don’t have it in me to think about anything else, especially babies.”

“Totally understand. No more talk of babies,” Peyton says quickly. “Right, Rebecca?”

“Right,” I say, my mouth dry. I stand up, smoothing the front of my watermelon pink dress. “Excuse me...I think I left something in my car.”

“Don’t let the dress -”

“Don’t let the dress drag on the ground,” I complete my sister’s sentence for her with a nod. “I won’t. Don’t worry.”

She turns back to the mirror, picking an imaginary piece of lint from the front of her dress.

I exit the bridal suite, walking through the narrow back hallway of the church until I get to the side exit. The setting sun’s beams hit my face. I take a gulp of fresh air and brush the hair away from my face.

This day is about Alyssa. The last thing anyone needs is a Maid of Honor distracting everyone with her own personal emotional crisis.

“Hey.”

I look up to see Eric. He looks incredible in a sharp black suit. His curly hair is tamed away from his face, making his hazel eyes stand out more than usual, and he’s holding a single red rose.

“Hey,” I reply weakly. “You showed up.”

“You weren’t expecting me to?”

I shrug.

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“I told you I’d be here. And I’m here.”

“Thank you,” I say, smiling a little. “You’re a very faithful pretend boyfriend. Very reliable, too.”

He holds the rose out to me. I take it, rotating it in my fingers and brushing my thumb against the velvety red petals.

“When I tell you I’m going to do something, I mean it,” he says to me.

“I know,” I reply.

“I wasn’t expecting to see you outside,” he says. “Aren’t you the Maid of Honor?”

“Yeah,” I say, glancing at the church door behind me. “I am. I just came out to get some air. It’s...tough, being in there.”

Eric clears his throat.

“Do you need to, uh...talk about it?” He asks uncertainly.

“Eric Stone, are you asking me if I want to talk to you about my feelings?” I ask, cracking a true smile now.

“Yes,” he replies carefully. “I guess I am. Isn’t that what women tend to do?”

“I’d say most people have a need to discuss their feelings from time to time,” I

answer. “Not just women. But yes, women tend to talk about their feelings. Especially with boyfriends. But you’re only a pretend boyfriend today, so I’ll let you off the hook. I know how you feel about touchy-feely stuff.”

He nods.

“You look great,” he says.

“I look like a cupcake at a five year-old’s princess themed birthday party,” I snort.

“I happen to like cupcakes,” he says. “So I’m not seeing the downside of the situation. Beautiful woman dressed up like a pastry? Sounds good to me.”

I lean back against the door to the church and laugh now, really laugh for the first time since I arrived this morning.

“That might be the closest thing to a joke that I’ve ever heard you say,” I tell Eric. “And I’ve known you for seven years.”

“Seven years and eight months,” he replies.

“Seven years and eight months,” I say.

“I’m not joking though,” he says. “You look beautiful. Only...”

“What?” I ask warily as he comes nearer.

His fingers brush against my cheek as he repositions one of the loose curls dangling from my updo, tucking it back into a Bobby pin at the base of my neck.

“There,” he says.

He starts to pull his hand away when I reach up and take it in mine. His body stiffens, and his eyes are on mine.

“What are you doing?” He asks, his voice quiet.

“I don’t know,” I reply honestly. “I’m just...not ready for you to stop.”

“Stop what?”

“Not ready for you to stop touching me,” I say, giving his hand a squeeze. “It feels nice.”

Eric’s body is still tense, the muscles in his jaw working as he stares me down.

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“You look so intimidating right now,” I breathe, not knowing why I’m saying my thoughts aloud. “I remember how intimidated I used to be of you...back when I first started working for you. I was fresh out of grad school and you were the only person who gave me a call back. After you hired me, I realized why you were were so desperate, why you were having such a hard time finding an assistant.”

“I had a hard time finding an assistant because I have high standards,” Eric replies.

“That’s the reason you tell yourself,” I smile. “But the real reason is because you scare people off. You make it hard to help you, because you’re so intimidating to everyone you meet. People don’t understand you.”

“You do,” he says, surprising me.

I shake my head.

“I don’t think so.”

“You do,” he says.

He takes another step forward so that our bodies are pressed together, and brings his hands to cup my face.

“You understand me better than most,” he continues. “Maybe better than anyone else. Why do you think I asked you to be my wife in the first place, Rebecca?”

I blink at him.

“Do you think I would have made an offer like that to just anyone?” He continues. “To share a life together? I need someone by my side who knows me, someone I can trust. And that narrows down the number of candidates by a considerable amount.”

“Isn’t that lonely?” I ask him. “Having such a small circle? So few people you can turn to?”

I expect Eric to say no, that it’s not lonely at all.

Because surely, men like Eric Stone don’t get lonely. Men like Eric Stone are all business, all stiff suits and dense research papers and late nights at the office, all ambition, with no time for frivolous things like jokes, like happy hours and social events...

Things like real marriages and real love.

But Eric’s answer surprises me.

“It’s more lonely than you can even imagine,” he replies in a hoarse voice. “The amount of time I spend with myself...the amount of time I spend in my own head. I don’t know how to be any other way. I want something more but I can’t reach it. I can’t break through the...”

“The what?”

“The block in my mind,” he says. “It’s like I’m missing something, something that everyone else just has, the thing that makes talking to people easy and natural. Whatever that thing is, I don’t have it. Never have. I’m missing a piece.”

“No you aren’t,” I reply quickly. “Don’t say something like that, Eric. You’re not missing a piece. You’re whole. You’re just...yourself. You’re different than most,

but that's a good thing. Why would you want to be the same as everyone else? Look at all of the amazing things you can do that nobody else can!"

"Yes. But that's work," he replies dismissively. "I want more."

"What do you want?" I ask.

"The same thing you do," he says. "Love."

He holds my face in place, pinning me to the door behind me with his body pressed against mine. I'm watching him, watching my boss bring his lips to mine and pull me into a kiss that sets my heart on fire.

Love.

He wants love. But he can't give it to me. And prior to now, I didn't think I'd be able to give it to him either. But in the blink of an eye, my perspective on this man has flipped upside down.

Eric isn't the robot everyone makes him out to be.

He has feelings, he has a heart. It's all inside of him, it's always there. But the walls around it are tall.

Lonely.

Eric Stone is lonely.

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Right now he's kissing me with so much passion, so much soul, that I'm ashamed that I could have ever believed my boss to be soulless.

"Ah!"

The door behind us opens and I fall backwards, with Eric tumbling after me. We land in a heap on the floor of the church hallway, with my mother standing above us.

"Oh, I wondered where you went," she says, looking at Eric with glee. "Eric, it's so lovely that you were able to come today. When I told my friends that the Eric Stone, of the Stone brothers, was coming to my daughter's wedding, none of them believed me. You simply have to let me take a photo with you later."

"Yes," Eric says, standing and helping me to my feet. "Of course. I'd be happy to."

Liar.

Eric hates photos. It's why he dodges every press event and charity ball he gets an invitation to. I know, because I'm usually the one on the phone with them, giving them an excuse from a wide variety of excuses in rotation.

"Well, I better take my seat," Eric says, glancing at his watch.

"I'll see you after the ceremony?" I ask him.

My mother looks from Eric to me.

“Of course,” he says. He leans forward and gives me a kiss on the cheek that lacks the same fiery passion as our kiss from before, but even this brief peck sends sparks shooting through me.

Once he’s gone, I go back inside, ready to walk back to the bridal suite and help my sister. But my mother stops me.

“Wait,” she says.

“What is it?”

She looks at me with narrowed eyes and I shift my weight from foot to foot nervously. I’ve never been great at lying to my mom. But could she really pick up on my fake relationship with Eric?

“When I first saw you two at lunch the other day, I had my initial concerns,” she says. “I didn’t want to say anything but...seeing that display of affection just now, I feel I have to.”

“What are you talking about?” I ask.

“Rebecca, dear, I know that I’ve been hounding you about finding a man,” she says. “And heavens, maybe you were just taking my advice when you got into this relationship with Eric! But I’m beginning to worry that he might not be taking you very seriously.”

I frown.

“Mom, what are you saying?” I ask. “Just get to your point, please.”

“I’ve told you before,” she says. “Men are always going to look at you differently

because of your...figure. It's not fair but that's just how the cookie crumbles. They'll have a tendency to see you as temporary fun, and you have to be on guard for that."

Oh. My. God.

My mother doesn't think our relationship is fake. She thinks Eric is leading me on. Using me, in other words, for sex.

It's not the first time she's given me this speech. Like the lecture about cardio, I've heard this speech frequently since my teen years. In my mom's mind, men don't take fat women seriously. They don't date them, and they definitely don't marry them.

Because men don't want to commit to fat women. They just want to hook up with them.

If only she knew that a week ago, Eric proposed marriage to me.

"Why are you laughing?" My mom snaps. "Why are you laughing? Stop that. Rebecca Loren, stop laughing at me this instant."

"Mom, I've got to go," I say, putting a hand on my stomach as my laughter comes to a stop. "This was a great talk, though. Thank you for looking out for me. Truly, it means a lot to me that you have my back and are defending me from any...what did you call them that one time? Chubby chasers?"

"I have never uttered those words in my life," my mother sniffs, tilting her chin up.

"Sure," I reply with a wink. "Of course you haven't. Anyway, I have to hurry. We have to be walking down the aisle in ten minutes, and there's a feathered headpiece in the bridal suite with my name on it."

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I pat my mother on the arm as I squeeze past her in the narrow hallway, walking back in the direction of giggling feminine voices coming from a door at the other end and thanking god that I don't have to endure this wedding date-less.

9

Eric

Thankfully, the ceremony is short.

The less time I have to sit with my butt in a pew listening to a minister talk about the deeper meaning of love and marriage, the better.

The only good thing about the ceremony was watching Rebecca walk down the aisle clutching a bouquet of pink roses. When she got to the front and took her place on the bride's side of the wedding arch, she found me in the crowd and angled her bouquet so that I could see the back of it. Tucked out of sight so that only she would be able to see it, was the red rose that I gave her.

I couldn't take my eyes off of her for the rest of the ceremony. She made up for my lack of emotion, tearing up at the couple's sentimental vows, crying again when they sealed their promise with a kiss.

Maybe I don't enjoy weddings...but I enjoy watching Rebecca.

After the ceremony, the wedding party stays behind to take photos with the photographer.

I follow the rest of the guests as we're herded from the sanctuary to the reception hall, where twinkling lights and flowers are spread from corner to corner. There's music booming from the speakers, and the lights are low.

I wonder if Rebecca will want me to dance with her. Dancing wasn't part of the deal and in truth, I'm not sure I can handle that. Not even for her.

"How do you know the bride?"

I look and see a woman in a blue dress smiling at me.

"I don't know the bride," I reply honestly. "I know her sister, Rebecca."

"Rebecca," she sighs. "Such a cute girl, right? She looked so adorable in that hairpiece. Bless her heart!"

I nod absentmindedly, looking around the room. When I feel a hand on my arm, I flinch.

"Want to get a drink?" she asks, jerking her head towards the bar in the corner.

"No, thanks."

"Aw, come on," she smiles, rubbing my arm with her hand and sidling closer to me.

"What, don't you drink?"

"I don't," I reply. I lean away from her, but this only makes her slide her chair closer to me.

"I love weddings, don't you?"

“No.”

She looks at me.

“Well, what do you like?” She asks. “Tell me. What does Eric Stone enjoy?”

There it is.

My name, spoken by someone I never introduced myself to. Am I really this recognizable? Or was this woman told that I would be here by someone else?

The reception hall is filling up with more people and I see the wedding party finally returning, groomsmen and bridesmaids and finally, the lucky couple themselves, the groom and his blushing bride.

I knew this event would be challenging, but I’m feeling more claustrophobic than anticipated. I have to get out of here. But as I rise from my chair, so does the woman in the blue dress.

“I need to go,” I say, taking a step away from her. She hooks her hand around my elbow, closing the distance between us again.

The claustrophobia increases. My chest tightens. My eyes scan the bridal party. I see a flurry of pink feathers standing tall above the heads of all the others and Rebecca peers around the crowd of groomsmen, searching. Her eyes find mine. Then they drop to the woman’s hand on my arm. She looks back at me with a frown. Turning back to her sister, she says something to her and then steps away from the crowd, walking to me with hurried footsteps.

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“Eric,” she says. “I was wondering if you could help me with something in the sanctuary real quick. Apparently there’s a flower situation.”

“Sure.”

I peel the woman on my arm off of me and follow my pink date to the exit. We make the short walk to the empty sanctuary and close the doors, cutting off the distant sound of music and people.

“What’s this flower situation about?” I ask, looking around.

“What?” Rebecca asks, turning back to me. “Oh, that. That was just an excuse. You looked like you could use a breather.”

I drop into a nearby pew and sigh in relief. The tightness in my chest is still present, but improving already. It actually began to loosen as soon as we got out of that dark and crowded reception hall.

Rebecca takes a seat next to me, careful not to brush against me in the process.

“We can stay here for as long as you need to,” she says quietly.

I nod, breathing slowly, feeling the clenching of my chest loosen more with every exhale.

One thing I’ve always appreciated about Rebecca is that she doesn’t mind silence. Some people feel the need to fill silence with endless talking, seeing silence as

something wrong, something to be fixed. An absence of something that should be there.

For me, silence is like water, essential and sometimes too scarce for comfort.

With Rebecca, it's never scarce. She gives it freely and easily, never seeing it as a sign that something is wrong. Never making me feel like something is wrong with me for it, either.

"Don't you need to be in there?" I ask after a few minutes go by. "To make a speech, or something?"

"Alyssa and her fiancé decided against wedding speeches," she replies with a smile. "She's afraid my mom will say something stupid. Honestly, my mom will probably say something stupid no matter what. Already did, in fact."

"What did she say?"

She shakes her head.

"Just that you're only dating me for sex," she says. "She thinks guys only want one thing from girls like me."

"What do you mean by girls like you?" I ask with a frown.

"You know..." she says, giving me a knowing look.

"I don't know," I reply.

"Heavy girls," she replies, looking away from me. "God, it sounds so dumb just repeating it. I told you, she says stupid stuff. No wonder Alyssa doesn't want to hand

her a microphone tonight. Wise choice.”

I’m turning this information over in my mind.

“I don’t understand,” I say. “Why would your body impact the things that I want from you?”

“Because you’re like...out of my league,” she laughs. “I mean, look at you. And then you’re rich, too. People are looking at us tonight and wondering why the hell you’re with me. And then their mind starts searching for explanations. It’s a classic cliché, an older man banging his younger assistant. Except with a twist: his assistant is fat.”

“I’m not even sleeping with you,” I say.

“People don’t know that,” she replies.

Oh. Right.

We fall silent again for a few minutes. Rebecca takes the fluffy feathered hair piece from her head, turning it in her fingers.

“I like that,” I say, nodding to it.

She smiles, turning to me.

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“You can keep it,” she says. She leans forward, tucking the pink burst of feathers into my jacket pocket. “There.”

“How do I look?” I ask.

“Very handsome,” she says. Her eyes rise from the hair piece to my face. “But then, you always look handsome.”

She begins to pull her hand away from my chest. I grab it, and then pull her along the pew so that she’s sitting right next to me.

“I didn’t get to finish what I started earlier,” I say to her.

“I know,” she says softly.

She rests her hand on my thigh. Just like the night of the company party, her touch doesn’t seem to bother me. I look down at her hand on my leg and wonder what the hell is different about her, what she’s got that others don’t, how the fuck she manages to get past my barriers, without me even realizing she’s doing it.

My cock is hard. It wouldn’t be difficult, fucking her. She wouldn’t even have to take the dress off. I’d pull it up, bend her over the back of this pew, and take her from behind.

“I want you,” I say. “But once we cross that line, there’s no going back to how things were before. We work together. We see each other every day, Monday through Friday. This changes things.”

Her eyes tell me she knows what I'm talking about. And her body tells me she doesn't care, that she wants me just as much as I want her right now.

"It doesn't matter to me," she says. "We both want the same thing. It's like you said. We're both lonely. We both want love. I know we're not in love and I know that you can't promise me love. But we could have...something else. We could have this."

She squeezes my thigh gently, and then her hand wanders up to my groin, brushing against my cock.

She's too perfect to be real. How can this be? How can she look at me with so much acceptance? No expectations. No judgment.

She looks at me like it's not a problem for her. Like she can deal with me and all of my idiosyncrasies, in the way that I can't give her the things that women need. But I've been through this enough to know that even if she can do that for a while, she can't do it forever. Nobody can.

The scene plays out in front of me like a movie. Three months from now, the resentment boils over and she's walking out on me. Telling me she needs more, that I'm too distant, too disconnected. Telling me that it's not enough. That I'm not enough. Saying she needs more than I can give.

I can provide for her.

I can even protect her as I did last week when I saw that fucker put his hands on her.

But these things are not enough. And Rebecca is too sweet, too kind to tie herself down to a guy like me. To waste her time, waste her years with me knowing that we're incompatible.

I know all of this, and yet I still want her. Is that selfish?

Maybe.

My skin is heated, burning for her, demanding to brush against hers. She's right here, looking up at me like I'm some kind of fucking hero, like I'm the Prince Charming she's been waiting for all her life, and I know I should correct her. I know I should tell her that she's got the wrong guy, remind her of what we talked about at my house, about how I can't be what she needs me to be.

This would be the right thing to do, but dammit, I don't want to do what's right.

Not now. Not with her pressed against me, her hand cupping me, looking up at me with this please fuck me expression on her beautiful face.

"Once we cross this line..." I begin.

"We can't undo it," she says.

"Right."

"Is it bad that I don't care?" she asks.

"Yes. But I don't care either, and that's worse," I say. "I'm your boss. I should know better."

"But you don't care," she says, her hand gripping my cock, now solidly hard, through my pants.

"I don't care about anything right now," I say quietly. "Nothing but you."

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“That seems impossible,” she replies. “But I know you better than to accuse you of exaggerating.”

“I don’t exaggerate.”

“I know,” she says.

She squeezes my cock.

“You’re the most beautiful woman I’ve ever fucking seen,” I say. “And I’ve had to work with you for years.Years.”

“You’re telling me you thought I was beautiful this entire time?”

“Yes,” I say. “Beautiful. I’m not blind. At the end of the day I’m still a guy. And some of the things you wear to the office...once or twice I’ve considered asking you not to wear that blue skirt. That blue skirt fucks up my concentration.”

Her eyes widen.

“Now I wonder if youareexaggerating,” she says. “You don’t notice anything that’s not right in front of your face. Nothing that’s not relevant to work, especially. You’re so focused at work, always so serious and business-like.”

“Doesn’t mean I don’t notice your ass in that skirt,” I grunt.

Her hand strokes me through my pants and I lean my head back, closing my eyes.

“You’re very good at pretending to be indifferent, then,” she replies. “You always seem indifferent to anything that isn’t one of your obsessions.”

She drops to the floor, kneeling in front of me as her fingers undo my fly. Pulling my cock out, she strokes the length of the shaft in her hand while taking the tip into her mouth, her tongue flicking the underside of my cock while she sucks gently.

“What if you’re my new obsession?” I ask, the words leaving my mouth against my better judgment.

She stops what she’s doing for a moment and looks up at me.

“Then the feeling is mutual.”

10

Rebecca

Giving my boss a blowjob in a church isn’t really what I envisioned doing when my sister first told me that she was engaged.

Then again I don’t know what I envisioned. Something involving being alone with nobody to dance with except for our awkward cousin Timothy, probably. Looking chubby and out of place behind my sister as she says her “I do”s, with everyone looking at me with pity — the single, older sister with no date to the wedding, no diamond ring in sight.

It’s exactly the kind of thing that families like mine love to speculate about. My mother leading the pack.

When I invited Eric to the wedding, I knew I’d be throwing a grenade on everyone’s

preconceived notions of me and I'll admit, I enjoyed that thought. Arriving to the wedding with Eric Stone, some fancy billionaire guy that most of them have only heard about from news segments and articles in magazines.

But Eric has made it clear that he's not here out of pity for me, or even to do a favor.

He's here because he wants to be here. Or at least, he wants to be wherever I happen to be at the time. With me.

He. Wants. Me.

Even knowing this though, even after the way he kissed me outside of the church before the ceremony...I still didn't expect this.

But here I am on the floor, kneeling in front of him, his thick shaft sliding over my tongue as the man it belongs to tosses his head back and groans, the most uninhibited I've ever seen him.

It's fun. Making him fall apart like this, making his walls fall down and his usual stiff and professional demeanor dissolve as he forgets what he's supposed to be doing, how he's supposed to be doing it, allowing us to cross so many professional lines that I doubt I'll be able to look at him in the same way ever again.

I haven't thought about what happens when I go back to work Monday morning.

Haven't considered the consequences of what we're doing right now, though I know that I should.

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I can't bring myself to care though, especially when Eric pushes me away and stands, yanking me towards the pew and bending me over the back of it. Before I know what's happening, the skirt of my pink dress is flipped up over my back and he's yanking my underwear down, gliding his cock against my opening and pushing in.

"Fuck, you feel good," he breathes, stroking my backside softly as he pushes all the way in. He stays there for a moment, hesitating.

"Are you okay?"

"Fine," he says. "Just savoring this. You can't imagine how many times I've wanted to do this to you, right there in the office."

"No way," I reply.

"Yes," he says. "Usually when you're talking back to me. You know, you're the only one at the office who gets away with that. Didn't you ever wonder why?"

"I assumed it's because of my superb work ethic," I reply, grinding back against him. "And the fact that you wouldn't last a day on the job without my help."

"That is why you get paid so well," he replies. "Better than any of my other assistants before or after. But the reason you get by with so much sarcasm at work is for another reason entirely."

"What's the reason?" I ask.

I pull away from him a little, letting his cock slide out of me.

He grips my hips tightly, his fingers digging into my flesh just enough for it to hurt a little, and slams me back against him, his cock filling me again and hitting that spot inside of me that makes me want to scream.

“The reason,” he mutters, pulling out and then slamming back into me with even greater force than before. “Is because every time you talk back to me at work, my brain immediately goes to this. Wanting to bend you over my desk and. Fuck. Your. Tight. Pussy.”

He punctuates every word with a brutal thrust until my arms feel weak, hardly able to brace me against the back of the pew beneath his weight and force. Maybe he senses this because he pulls out and flips us now so that I’m on top. He pulls the straps of my dress down so that my breasts spill out and begins thrusting into me from below, faster than I can even keep up.

“Love this position,” he says, easing my mind with any insecurities or doubts I might have felt from being so exposed, my weight resting on top of his thighs. He bounces me on top of his lap like it’s nothing to him. “I want you to show me how you touch yourself.”

My eyes widen. Even with Eric boosting my confidence, I’m not sure I can do that in front of him.

“Do it now,” he orders me, his voice having that familiar hard edge that he occasionally takes with me in the office. “Show me.”

When I don’t obey, he stops thrusting into me and leans in, gripping my hair in his hand and kissing me hard on the mouth.

“I need to know how you do it when you’re alone,” he breathes against my lips. “Show me what you like, baby. Show me what feels good to you. And then I’ll show you how to make it feel ten times better.”

I hesitate for just a second more. His grip on my hair tightens, the slight pinch of pain bringing me out of my mind and back into my body. I feel his cock inside of me, buried and stretching me tight. I feel his lips against my throat as he kisses my neck, my shoulders, dragging his parted lips and tongue across my skin like I’m something he’s going to eat.

Every nerve ending on my body is awake now and with Eric’s orders, what I need to do feels simple. There’s no room in my mind right now for insecurity or doubt, not anymore. I know what to do; Eric is in control, and for once, I don’t mind being bossed around by him.

Impatient, he guides my hand down to the apex of my thighs and simulates stroking myself. I fall in line now, showing him what he’s demanding to see, the way that I touch myself when I’m alone. Only it’s so much more intense with his length inside of me, multiplying the pleasure.

He really does watch me, his eyes on my fingertips in the dim light of the darkened room, and after a moment, he pushes my fingers aside, replacing them with his own.

“Like this?” He asks, circling my clitoris with the pads of his first two fingers.

“Yes,” I breathe.

I feel so wanted beneath his watchful stare. The object of his obsession, feeling what it must be like to be a research paper crossing his desk, something to be studied in his lab.

I never believed this would be romantic, much less arousing...but Eric's attention is all-consuming, his focus uninterrupted, even when a burst of laughter breaks out loud enough to be heard from the reception hall in the distance.

"You're so wet for me," he says, quickening the pace of his fingers as he circles his hips, grinding against me with the full length of his shaft still deeply buried inside of me.

On fire. My body feels like it's on fire, in the best way possible. I hardly hear what he says next, murmuring forbidden promises as I lean forward and press my forehead against his. But then I hear three words, another order given clearly and forcefully.

"Come for me," he growls, grinding into me harder.

And then I do. He clamps a hand over my mouth to muffle my moans as I buck against him, riding his cock as my shaking orgasm sends wave after wave of pleasure through my body, radiating from my core to every limb until I can't keep going.

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When I collapse back against him, he removes his hand from my mouth and begins to bounce me on his lap again. I feel his cock swell in length and his fingers dig into my hips, his icy gaze so powerful and so demanding as he releases into me.

We stay like that for a moment or two, and with the physical pleasure behind us, I feel the familiar insecurities creeping back into my mind. Eric pulls back from me and grips my chin in his hand, staring me down. Then he kisses me, slow and long, and all thoughts wipe from my mind again.

11

Eric

Elijah and Emmett are in the conference room with their laptops and coffee when I arrive.

“Wow,” Emmett says as I close the door behind me, noisily making my way to my spot at the table.

“What?”

“Just...wow,” Emmett says, shaking his head. He looks at his watch. “Thirty minutes late. Usually you’re the one waiting on us. Should I give you the customary lecture about the importance of punctuality? Or have you already given it to yourself on the way here, given that you’re its original author?”

“Funny.”

“Liar. You never find anything I say funny,” Emmett says. “What’s up with you this morning?”

“Traffic,” I mutter.

“Is traffic why you’re wearing mismatched shoes?” Elijah asks.

I look down.

Son of a bitch.

I only have two sets of shoes that I wear to the office. Brown, and black. This morning, my feet are sporting one of each.

“Is it that noticeable?” I ask, cursing to myself.

“Is it noticeable that you’re wearing one brown shoe and one black?” Emmett asks. “Not particularly. Nobody is going to stare at your shoes. But I’ll tell you what is noticeable, that hickey just under your collar.”

My hand reaches up to my neck reflexively.

“What? Where?”

“Ha!” Emmett claps his hands together. “I knew it. Little brother got laid this weekend.”

“Fuck off.”

“I’m just messing with you,” he continues. “The shoes are fine. If it bothers you that much, just get Rebecca to grab you a matching shoe.”

“I don’t send my assistant on shoe errands,” I reply. I’m feeling warm at the unexpected mention of her name. “Unlike you, I do actual work in my department. The shoes will stay as they are.”

“Suit yourself,” Emmett shrugs.

Elijah stares at me.

“Surprised you had time to get laid in between pummeling the shit out of our employees,” he says.

“What?” I ask.

He opens a file in front of him, tossing a stack of papers at me. I look down and scan the first page to find that Larry Welch has filed a lawsuit against the company.

“That motherfucker,” I hiss under my breath. “Seriously?”

“Yeah,” Elijah says. “Seriously.”

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“It won’t hold,” I say dismissively, tossing the papers down. “He doesn’t have a case. The judge will toss it. And if he doesn’t, we’ll destroy him in court.”

“Of course we will,” Elijah replies. “But that’s not the point. Do you have any idea how bad the optics are of something like this? The press will hear of it eventually. I’ve got our PR team on it, so we’ll probably be able to contain the fire. But internally, the rumors are already spreading.”

“What rumor is there to spread?” I snap. “Guy got out of line at the party last week and attacked someone. I handled it. That’s all there is to say.”

Elijah raises a brow.

“An attack? The lawsuit doesn’t mention that.”

“Of course it doesn’t,” I say. “Why would Welch want to volunteer that information?”

“Can you prove this?” Elijah asks.

I shrug.

“Sure,” I say. “Rebecca can give a witness statement, and I’ve got a security camera in my office.”

“It was Rebecca?” Emmett growls. “Fuck.”

“She’s okay,” I say. “She was shaken up but...”

I stop there. I don’t want to tell my brothers more about that night. That she was drunk, mixed with medicine, and completely passed out by the end of the night.

My brothers respect the hell out of Rebecca, as they should, and I’m not about to share anything that they could interpret the wrong way. It was an accident, as Rebecca said, and sometimes things like this don’t need to be talked about.

“I can’t believe that fuck-head touched Rebecca,” Emmett says, visibly tense. “I’ll kill him. I’ll rip his fucking head off.”

“That won’t be necessary,” Elijah says, flipping through the papers in front of him. “According to this document, our little brother has already done that. Along with a slew of other injuries. A little overkill, don’t you think? I don’t know how we’re going to swing self-defense with this one. Might be better to settle out of court.”

“We’re not giving that fucker any money,” I snap.

“Damn right,” Emmett says, looking at Elijah. “Settle out of court? He’s lucky if he doesn’t get jail time. When we’re done with him, he’ll -”

“Don’t you have a ten o’clock meeting?” Elijah interjects, looking at his watch. “Better get going.”

Emmett looks at his own watch and relents.

“Fine,” he says, pointing a finger at us. “But this isn’t over. Don’t settle out of court, don’t cooperate with his lawyers. We’re going to mop the floor with this guy. Nobody touches our employees. Especially Rebecca. Of all the people, he attacks the sweetest girl at this damn company? Fuck no. Absolutely fucking not.”

I feel a twinge of appreciation for my brother now. Emmett is the hothead of the three of us. Usually, I don't find his temper helpful. But it's validating, listening to Emmett talking about Welch like he'd like to beat the shit out of him, mirroring my own sentiment. He sounds as furious as I felt that night when I walked in on that scene. Sounds as furious as I still feel even now, thinking about how I allowed him to walk away that night with his legs still in working order.

If I'd had more time...if she hadn't been waiting for me back upstairs...if the security team hadn't come when they heard Welch wailing in pain on the ground...

Well. I don't know what the fuck I would have done to that guy. Maybe something that even our fancy lawyers wouldn't be able to get me out of.

Emmett exits. Elijah turns to me.

"If you're sleeping with Rebecca, we'll need you both to sign some paperwork with HR."

"What the fuck did you just say?"

"If you're sleeping with Rebecca," he says calmly. "And I'm being generous by saying 'if'. As though there's any doubt, which there's not. Last week at lunch, you disappeared for 20 minutes. At first, I thought you were just pissed off and ditching us, or something. But then I go looking for you and spot you sitting next to her. You looked cozy, Eric. More cozy than boss and subordinate who just happened to bump into each other at lunch."

I say nothing.

"You're not contradicting me, so I'm going to take that as confirmation of my suspicions," he says. "Look, it's not a big deal. I've already been through this once

with Emmett and Charlotte. It would be nice if my brothers would stop dating their employees...but since that doesn't seem to be possible, I've become well-versed in the paperwork involved. You'll both need to sign it."

"I'm not signing anything," I reply. "We're not dating."

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“So you’re just...what? Hooking up with her?”

I don’t fucking know what to say.

Yes? Yes. I’m sleeping with her. And I’m not dating her. So I guess that technically counts as “hooking up.” But I don’t like that term. It cheapens things. What we have is more than a hook up, even if it’s not commitment either.

“She knows it’s just casual,” I reply.

Elijah lets out a low whistle.

“Eric, you’re not much of a liar,” he says. “As the oldest brother, I’ve always known when you’re full of shit and right now you’re full of it.”

“What are you talking about? I haven’t lied about anything. You asked if I’m sleeping with Rebecca and I told you. There’s nothing being hidden.”

“I’m talking about how you’re obviously hung up on her enough to show up to meetings late, forget things...wear mismatched shoes,” Elijah says, gesturing to my feet. “The king of routine and stability is suddenly unreliable and flighty. You might be able to fool Emmett with your bullshit but you’re far from fooling me. Come on.”

I say nothing, eyeing the exit. I know I could leave now and end the conversation here. Elijah would probably allow it. And I can probably dodge his stupid HR paperwork, too.

“Look, I know you’re not big into dating,” Elijah says. “But I wouldn’t peg you for the kind of careless to casually hook up with your assistant. You have more regard for your career — and for Rebecca — than that. This is something more. Even a robot like you can -”

“Knock it off,” I snap. “Knock it off with that robot shit, would you? For fuck’s sake, I’m not a god damned robot. And I’m sick of you and Emmett making your stupid ass jokes about that. Just because I don’t wear my heart on my sleeve and go around making my feelings other people’s problems, that doesn’t mean I’m a fucking robot.”

“Stop yelling,” Elijah says, glancing out the window of the conference room.

I turn to look behind me and see heads peering over cubicles, curious eyes looking in at us. I didn’t even realize I was yelling.

“I didn’t realize the robot jokes bothered you,” he says, looking back at me. “You just needed to say something. I’ll stop.”

“I shouldn’t have to say something,” I mutter.

“Well, it’s hard to tell what the hell you’re thinking or feeling most of the time,” Elijah says. “The only reason I had a hunch about this thing with Rebecca is because you have been showing some emotion lately. For a change.”

“The only emotion I’m showing right now is anger,” I say.

“Like the anger you had when you took down Welch?” He asks, tapping the papers on the table between us.

“Yes,” I say, staring him down. “Like that.”

Elijah looks at the papers, flipping the corners with his thumb.

“Don’t waste this,” he says.

“What?”

“Don’t waste this opportunity, Eric,” he says. “This thing you’ve got with Rebecca right now. Don’t waste it. Don’t do that thing you always do.”

“What thing am I always doing?”

“You run,” he says simply. “You hide away. Just when we think we might be getting somewhere with you, you draw back and pull away. Like you can handle too much realness. You go hide in your books and your research and lock the world out.”

“Maybe the world needs to be locked out,” I say, thinking of the crowded wedding reception this weekend, of the way my chest went tight, the woman in the blue dress clinging to my arm like an oily film.

“Maybe,” Elijah agrees. “Just some of the world, though. Not all of it. There’s some good in the world, in other people. I don’t know what Rebecca has done to you lately but I’d say she’s good for you.”

“Making me forget to wear matching shoes is good for me?”

“Breaking you out of your box is good for you,” he says. “Every once in a while. It’s what you need. But damn if you’re going to do that on your own. It’s on us — Emmett and me — to initiate. And now Rebecca is helping us out, it seems. And doing a better job at it than either of us have ever managed to do.”

“What if I don’t love her?” I ask. “It’s not right to continue something with her. She

wants something I can't give to her.”

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“Why the hell would you say you don’t love her?” Elijah snorts. “You don’t know the first thing about your own emotions and you think you can say with any authority whether you love her?”

“How else do you know?”

“Love is more than an emotion you feel towards someone,” Elijah shakes his head. “It’s an action. A verb. You perform the act of loving Rebecca by protecting her. By taking care of her, by wanting to be near her. Isn’t that enough?”

“Is it?”

“What more is there?” He shrugs. “Love means duty, Eric. Like a soldier going to battle to protect his homeland. You’ll go to battle for that woman and I’d say that’s an indication that you feel something for her. Fuck whatever label people need to put on that. Love doesn’t have a single definition. It looks different on everyone.”

“Love means duty.”

I repeat the words, thinking of the night I spent staying up in that hard chair, afraid that if I got comfortable, I’d fall asleep. I cleaned her up, watched her all night. Listened to her problems as she drunkenly rambled to me with her head in the toilet. And then, by morning, aimed to solve her problems — in my own, somewhat misguided way.

It’s not something I’d do for many people. Few people, in fact. And yet I did it for her.

“You might be onto something,” I say to Elijah.

He leans in, staring me down.

“Don’t. Waste. It,” he says. “Lock this thing down. Give her whatever she wants. Stop being a fucking idiot.”

I stand up and nod.

“Good pep talk,” I say. “Stop being a fucking idiot. I’ll remember that advice.”

Elijah tilts his head, looking up at me thoughtfully.

“I think...I think you just made a joke,” he says. “At the very least, it was a sarcastic remark. It must be snowing in hell right now.”

“A blizzard, actually,” I say over my shoulder on my way out.

12

Rebecca

It’s Friday evening. Unusual for me to work late. But for some reason, Eric asked me to stay late tonight and reformat meeting notes.

In other words, grunt work. Meaningless busy work.

It feels like a punishment. Like the way a teacher might ask you to stay after class to write lines. Little to no value in doing it, other than making your writing hand cramp up, and making you miss out on hanging with your friends after school.

Did I do something wrong?

Eric isn't the type to dish out punishments like this, though. I've witnessed him chewing out an employee before; Eric doesn't mince words, and ultimately, he's not afraid to give someone the ax if it comes down to that. So if I'd done something wrong, something to displease him, I would definitely know about it.

But then, why else would he be making me stay late like this?

All week, Eric's been different. But in a good way. We've crossed the line multiple times. With him making excuses for me to come see him in his office, the blinds closed, the door locked, and...

Well. You can guess what happens next.

Let's just say that the church pew from Alyssa's wedding isn't the only thing he's bent me over.

I pull my phone out of my bag and check the screen for missed calls and texts. Nothing from Eric, not even a response to the text message I'd sent him earlier today. A single heart emoji. Maybe that was a step too far. But god, how can a heart emoji be taking things too far when having sex in his office isn't?

The man confuses me.

One minute he's hot and one minute he's cold. Telling me that he's lonely, telling me that he thinks I'm the most beautiful woman he's ever seen.

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And now this.

I shouldn't be so insecure. Men hate insecurity, don't they? And clinginess. And desperation. And...

"Fuck," I say under my breath. "Shake it off, Beck. He's not even your boyfriend. He's just your..."

My what?

I don't even know. My booty call? My...boss-slash-booty-call?

Doubt creeps into my mind. Since the wedding, I thought maybe we were getting somewhere. Like maybe Eric and I were building something more than a booty call.

But I know what Eric wants. A wife. Children. All of the usual things. Things I'm not even sure I could provide for him, even if I wanted to. But I'm not sure I want to, if Eric can't promise that he could love me – if not now, then some day in the future.

The worst thing of all is that I think I'm falling for him. Really falling for him. It's something I never expected, something happening so quickly that I'm hardly aware of it. Not until I get home from work at night, stripping off my work clothes and remembering the way that he touched me, the way that he looked at me that day.

It makes my heart skip a beat, gives my stomach butterflies, and I replay all of my favorite moments of the day every night when I get home. Like I'm in high school again with a new crush, holding my breath and waiting for the next time he looks at

me, smiles at me, pulls me into his arms and kisses me.

It's the most amazing feeling.

Until it's not.

Until I begin doubting myself, doubting him, wondering what the hell I'm thinking. Sleeping with my boss? Eric Stone, the guy who looked right through me for seven years? Eric Stone, the alleged robotic man who could never feel love towards me or any other woman?

He did me a favor by going to that wedding with me. In his mind, he was trying to help, trying to get my mom off my back about dating and marriage.

But what's his explanation now? If the point was to help me out so I didn't show up empty handed to my sister's wedding, why are we still doing this with the wedding behind us?

And why the hell am I staying late at the office on a Friday night re-organizing meeting notes that nobody will ever read?

Suddenly I hear the elevator doors on the other side of the room ding, opening up. Footsteps that sound hurried and heavy. In seconds, Eric Stone himself is standing in front of me, holding a thick, frayed book.

"Eric, what's -"

THUD.

He drops the large book in front of me.

“What thefuck,” I begin, pushing the book away from me.

“Look,” he says, tapping his finger on the page it’s opened up to. “Read this.”

I tear my confused gaze from his face and look down at the weathered old book.

It’s a dictionary.

His finger jabs an entry halfway down the page.

“You want me to read the definition of love,” I say flatly, looking up at him. “Why? Is this some kind of weird test, Eric? Or you want to prove a point to me? You already told me. I know how you feel about it, and you know how I feel about it.”

“Just read it,” he says.

“I know what love is,” I reply.

He sighs impatiently and turns the book around to himself, reading aloud.

“Love,” he says. “Strong affection arising out of kinship.”

He takes a marker from the cup of pens in the corner of my desk, drawing a thick black check mark over the entry.

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“We have that one,” he says excitedly, looking at my face to ensure I’m still watching. “Strong affection. Kinship.”

“Right,” I reply with uncertainty. “Kinship.”

“And strong affection,” he says. “Attraction, tenderness, based on sexual desire. We have that one too.”

He draws another thick black check mark beneath his first.

“Eric,” I say. “What is this?”

“I’ve been doing research,” he answers.

“You’ve been researching love?”

“Yes,” he says. He’s reading the entry below the second now. “Affection based on admiration, benevolence, or common interests. We have that. Most of that.”

“I can’t think of a common interest we have,” I reply truthfully.

“Sex,” he says.

“That doesn’t count.”

“It does the waywedo it,” he replies darkly. “I’m counting it.”

Another thick black checkmark.

I sigh.

“Warm attachment, enthusiasm, or devotion,” he continues. He glances up at me. “I feel attached to you. Enthusiastic too. And as I’ve already told you, when we get married -”

“It’s ‘when’ now, is it?” I ask wryly.

“When we get married, I’ll be the most devoted man to you that you can imagine,” he finishes, ignoring me. “Especially when you’re pregnant. You won’t have to do a thing.”

“When I’m pregnant,” I shake my head.

“If you’re pregnant,” he says quickly. “No expectation. No pressure, Rebecca. I don’t mind. If we never had kids, if it just didn’t work out that way for us...”

I watch him closely, wondering how this man suddenly knows how to say the things I badly need to hear. That I’m not expected to have any biological children, that it’s okay if that’s not something I can ever do. That I’m more to him than just a vessel, someone to fulfill his dreams with...

“I’ll be devoted regardless,” he says. “Because I know that’s how that role works.”

“What role?”

“Husband,” he replies as though the answer is obvious. “That role comes with duties.”

“And what about wife?” I ask him. “What kind of duties come with that?”

“I don’t know,” he replies. “I’m not aspiring to be a wife. I haven’t looked into it.”

“But you know what you’d like in a wife,” I say, stifling laughter now.

“Just...I don’t know,” he says. “Be there when I get home from work. Can you do that for me?”

“Not if you keep assigning me this bullshit,” I reply, gesturing to my laptop.

“You won’t be working here,” he says. “I told you. Your writing career. That’s what you’ll be doing.”

Oh. Right. I forgot about that detail of his proposal.

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“We’re getting off track,” he says, looking down at the dictionary between us. “Unselfish loyal and benevolent concern for the good of others.”

I put my hand over the page he’s reading, forcing him to look up at me.

“Eric,” I say. “What’s this for? Because I don’t need to be told the definition of love. I know what love is.”

“But I don’t,” he says. “Or, I didn’t. I didn’t think I loved you Rebecca but look. It’s right here, right in front of our faces. I love you.”

I shake my head.

“You’re supposed to just feel love,” I say. “Not read from a dictionary and diagnose yourself with it. You’re reading all of these symptoms like it’s some kind of virus that you’ve caught.”

“It kind of is,” he says.

“How romantic,” I reply, still laughing. “Just what every girl dreams of one day. A man coming to her and informing her that his feelings for her are like catching the flu.”

“I’ve got bad news for you,” he says seriously. “If you want to be with me, the word romantic isn’t one you’re going to be using to describe me very much.”

“I’m aware.”

“But,” he continues, pointing at the dictionary again. “This is love. It counts, and it’s real. Just because I’m not like Romeo or...or that douchebag from The Notebook-”

“Noah,” I reply, recalling a detail from the movie I’ve seen maybe a hundred times at least. “The guy in that movie was named Noah.”

“Right. Well, fuck Noah,” he says. “First, her dad says they’re not allowed to be together, and he just accepts that and lets her go. Then she moves away and all he does is write her a bunch of stupid letters instead of growing a pair of balls and -”

“That’s so unfair,” I argue. “He was drafted into the war, letters were all that he could...wait. Are you saying you’ve actually seen The Notebook?”

I gape at him.

“We’re off topic again,” he replies stiffly.

“No, this is important,” I insist. “When the hell did you see The Notebook? We’re not moving on until you explain.”

“Elijah’s wife made us all watch it,” he replies. “Happy?”

“Wow.”

“Stupid sappy movie,” he says dismissively. “Two hours of my life that I’ll never get back. Can we move on now?”

“Fine.”

“This says that I love you,” he says, pointing at the dictionary and looking at me.

“Okay,” I reply. “That’s...very interesting. I’m glad you did some research on love.”

“That’s all you have to say?”

“What else is there to say?”

“I tell you that I love you and you tell me that you’re glad I did research and that it’s very interesting,” he says frustratedly.

“You said that the dictionary says that you love me,” I reply. “You didn’t say ‘I love you’.”

“It’s the same thing.”

“It’s really not,” I reply.

He searches his breast pocket for something, pulling out a velvet ring box and setting it on top of the dictionary between us. I stare at it.

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“Rebecca,” he says, his voice deep and soft. “I’m doing my best. This is new to me. I’ve never done any of this before, because no woman has ever made me want to try. So I’m learning. I’m going to need you to meet me halfway here.”

I’m still staring at the ring, speechless.

“Did you hear what I said?” he presses.

“You bought a ring,” I say. “You actually bought an engagement ring for me?”

“Yes,” he says. “That’s what you’re supposed to do, isn’t it? When you want a woman to marry you? You go out and buy an expensive ring to sweeten the deal?”

“If you think an expensive ring would change whether or not I want to marry you,” I say. “You don’t know me well enough to marry me.”

“Dammit,” Eric says loudly, running a hand through his hair.

He strides to the nearby window, looking out at the city cloaked in darkness with his hands on his hips. When he turns back around, he’s staring me down with that familiar intensity in his hazel eyes, rubbing his jaw.

“I don’t know how to do this, Rebecca. And the more I talk, the more I’m going to put my foot in my mouth,” he says to me. “So I’ll stop talking. It’s up to you. You either want what I’m offering...or you don’t.”

“What are you offering?” I ask.

I expect him to answer with any of the many things he's said before.

Stability. Freedom to change careers. A family. A home. A fancy ring.

"Love," he answers. "I love you, Rebecca. That's what I'm telling you, that's what I've been telling you this whole time."

I nod, fidgeting with the ring box in front of me.

"I love you. I want to marry you," he continues. "The only question is, do you want to marry me?"

"I'm afraid," I confess.

"Of what?"

"Of you changing your mind," I reply. "You began to feel this way about me so suddenly. What if you stop feeling this way just as suddenly?"

"That's not possible," he replies. "Loving you is like...it's like waking up. Sudden and unplanned maybe, but not easily reversed. I can't just fall back asleep and forget about you. I've been awakened to things I feel, things I want out of life, and they're not things that I'm going to walk out of this room tonight and forget about. They don't just slip away like that, not for me. You know me, Rebecca. I might take my time coming to a conclusion...but once my mind is made up, it's made up."

I nod.

He's right.

I've watched this careful, thoughtful man for seven years and in that time he's been

steady. Dependable, reliable, consistent.

A man of habit and routine, a man who exhibits almost obsessive devotion to the things that he's dedicated to.

What if his newest obsession really is me?

How would it feel, to be the object of so much intense attention?

I'm already getting a taste of it, I think. He's staring at me, walking to me and taking the ring from my hands.

"Yes."

"What?" he asks.

"My answer is yes," I reply. "I want to marry you."

He tips my chin up with his fingertips, taking my mouth with his.

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“Before I take this off,” he murmurs, playing with the zipper of my skirt. “You need to put this on.”

He pulls away from me and opens the ring box. The gold band glides up my finger easily, the diamond sparkling in the glow of the nearby lamp.

“Don’t ever take it off,” he warns me.

“You’ve always said engagement rings are meaningless tokens,” I reply. “Now I can’t take mine off?”

“I’ve changed my mind,” he says. “I used to believe they were purposeless, just a thing to make women happy. Now I realize that the diamond rings are actually for the men.”

“How?”

“It’s our way of marking our territory,” he says. “This ring says ‘back off, she belongs to me.’ Other men see this and know.”

“Not all men respect a ring,” I tease him. “Not all men see it as a sign to back off.”

“I’m aware. And those men will be dealt with,” he replies.

With the ring now securely on my finger, Eric continues to undress me with hurried hands until I’m in nothing but a bra and underwear. Then he takes his arm and sweeps it across the desk, throwing the dictionary and my laptop to the floor.

“I’ve always wanted to do that,” Eric mutters, pushing me back onto the desk and kissing my neck.

“Pretty sure you just broke my laptop,” I reply. “Isn’t damaging company property against the employee rulebook?”

“Fuck the rulebook.”

Epilogue

Eric

The only problem that married life presents to me so far is the trouble I've had finding a replacement assistant.

I've gone through at least half a dozen in the three years that I have been married. It seems like there's not a single professional in the entire city who can do what Rebecca once did for me.

“I'm going to have to hire a second one,” I say.

“What?” Rebecca asks, looking up.

She's topping off my cup of coffee, her long hair glowing in the summer sun that shines through the French doors of our large dining room. At the other end of the table, her beaten-up laptop rests next to her own cup of coffee and a plate of untouched pancakes.

“Aren't you hungry?” I ask, nodding to her neglected breakfast.

She grimaces.

“It just...doesn’t seem appetizing this morning,” she replies. “Maybe Loren will eat them.”

Loren.

Our seven year-old daughter, officially adopted last year into our family. The social workers warned us that she’s been through a lot, that there’s a chance Loren would never feel totally at home in our house due to the instability of her life so far.

But Rebecca and I have been working at it hard. Every single day. When Loren was first placed in our home, Rebecca quit her job and I took a leave of absence for six months, the longest I’ve ever been able to step away from work. We spent every day with Loren, our soon-to-be adopted daughter, bonding with her and slowly building up her trust in us. In our home, in our family, in our ability to be dependable, reliable, and routine.

Routine is my middle name.

After those six months, our daughter was a completely different child. No longer fearful and nonverbal. No. She was a thriving, happy little girl. The social worker and her child therapist can hardly believe the progress she made in her first few months, and that progress has only grown since then.

It’s a proud moment for me, Loren’s dad, when we’re at the grocery store and she’s not afraid to let go of my hand, exploring the toy aisle without looking back at me to make sure I’m still there. It means that she trusts me. That I’ve proven to her that I’ll be the man that she needs me to be, the dad that she needs.

Being a father and a husband means more to me than I ever thought it could. More than work. More than my own life itself. I would do anything for my girls, and they know it.

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“I’ve been feeling so awful,” my wife continues, going back to her seat at the table and pushing the plate of pancakes away from herself as though they’re too repulsive to look at. “Tired and nauseated and...what? Why are you looking at me like that? Do I have something in my hair?”

She pats her hair, frowning at me.

I shake my head and inhale deeply.

“You don’t think you’re...” I drift off, unwilling to say the word pregnant.

As much as we tried after we got married, the double pink lines on the test never materialized. It was hard at first, even if we both said we were okay with never having a biological child. It’s not the sort of pain that you can really prepare yourself for, no matter how ready you believe you are to hear disappointing news.

After a year of trying, we decided to stop. The doctor appointments, the medication...it was wearing us both down. And at the same time, we’d started the adoption process and were introduced to the most special little girl we’d ever met.

When we met Loren, we realized that there was more to parenthood than DNA. And that there are a lot of children out there who don’t have a permanent home, nobody to call their mom and dad.

But even after all of this time, I know it still pains Rebecca to talk about her fertility. We don’t discuss it.

We also don't use birth control. Knowing that we have greater odds of being struck by lightning three times, we see no need for it. Condoms, the pill...what's the use? There's no point...right?

Rebecca looks at me with recognition in her eyes, tinged with sadness.

"Not possible," she replies.

"But you've been sick in the mornings?" I ask.

"Well...yeah," she says. "Probably a stomach bug. But then the fatigue...tender breasts..."

"When was your period due?"

"It's irregular," she replies, shaking her head again as though mentally pushing away the idea of pregnancy. "It's never really 'due' in that way. You know that."

"Still," I say, looking beyond her, out the windows of the French doors that lead to our back patio, where Loren is drawing on the concrete with chalk. Recently she's been obsessed with writing our names. Mama. Daddy. Loren. Mama. Daddy. Loren.

Over and over again, in pastels and fluorescents picked from her mega-box of 64 colors. Her handwriting is getting pretty good, too. Soon it'll be better than my own sloppy chicken scratch.

"If you're pregnant, we'll need to get you to the doctor early for monitoring," I continue, looking back at Rebecca. "That's my concern. You'd be high risk. The earlier, the better. That's what the doctor said."

"There's no way I'm pregnant, though," she says, her voice hardening. "How could I

be? We tried and tried, with all of the medicine and..."

My jaw clenches, remembering all of the disappointed hopes, the many months of taking pregnancy tests only for the night to end with my wife crying into my chest, with me holding her tightly, wishing that I could make her pain go away.

Do I really want to ask her to take a pregnancy test, knowing the toll that it takes on her?

"You're worried," Rebecca sighs.

"I am."

"I'll take a test," she volunteers, her eyes sad. "But you have to read it. I don't want to see it. I don't want to be told it's negative. I'll just...pee on a stick and leave it. Deal?"

"Deal."

Two pink lines, bright and clear, appear nearly as fast as my wife flees the bathroom, unwilling to stay a second longer than she has to.

My whole body freezes when I see the positive test. I read the box's instructions again, even though I know the directions to a pregnancy test very well by now. My wife has taken dozens of them. I could recite the step by step instructions printed on the side of the pink box in my sleep.

Still, I read the directions two more times just to make absolutely sure. Telling Rebecca she's pregnant only for it to turn out to be a mistake would be an awful thing to put her through, after all that we've already been through.

When I exit the bathroom, she's not in our master bedroom. I find her downstairs on our back patio, drawing with Loren.

Mama. Daddy. Loren.

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I swallow hard, imagining a fourth name drawn on the concrete, one year from now. Will it be a girl or a boy?

Rebecca looks up at me, her eyes wary. I come to her, pulling her up to me and embracing her tightly.

“It’s positive?” She whispers against my chest.

“It’s positive,” I reply, kissing her on the head. “Should we tell Loren?”

“Not yet,” she says. “I want to be sure...”

“Those lines are solid pink, Beck,” I say.

“I won’t believe it until I see a heartbeat on the screen,” she says, shaking her head. “I just...I don’t want to...”

I smooth her hair down and kiss her again. I know what she means. She doesn’t want to get her hopes up. With the many warnings and caveats that the doctor gave us alongside her diagnosis, we both know that a positive pregnancy test is only the beginning. The beginning of an adventure, one that holds excitement but also some frightening unknowns.

I know that it’s an adventure we’ll have together, though. And whatever comes next, I’ll be ready to weather the storm with her, to be the rock that she needs to make it through to the other side.

That's my duty.

Rebecca

"He's like me."

"You say that like it's a bad thing," I say, frowning at my husband. We're standing outside the door of Luke's preschool classroom.

The parent-teacher conference went well. Luke knows his letters, his numbers...and the names and characteristics of every single Star Wars character, even the ones from the spin-offs.

I'm a proud mom today.

Eric holds our son outside of the classroom. Luke looks like he's about to fall asleep any second now, his head of thick brown hair laying on my husband's shoulder. I love to see them like this. Eric is an incredible father, better than I could have even imagined.

Warm, kind, always ready with a hug or a band-aid whenever needed. Not a robot in the least. He's also protective and, believe it or not, the big worrier out of the two of us.

A frown creases his brow as we walk out of the school and to our car.

"It's not a bad thing," he says at last. "Just...I know what I went through at his age. I don't want him to deal with all of that."

"Things are better now than they were when you were growing up," I remind him. "It's not treated like a bad thing anymore. It's a gift, really. Every child is unique."

And that's okay."

Eric nods but he doesn't seem convinced.

"He's happy," I say to him. "Happy and smart, too."

"I never questioned that," he replies quietly. "He's smart as hell. Terrifyingly smart, actually."

I grin.

"But I want him to have friends," he continues. "I want him to be able to bond with people..."

"The teacher says he has friends," I remind him. "He plays with Julio at recess, remember? With the dinosaurs?"

Eric nods.

"He's a little quiet in class," I continue with a shrug. "A little introverted. That's fine. There's nothing wrong with that."

"And the eye contact?"

I open the car door and take Luke from Eric's arms. His eyes flutter open as I get him settled in the booster seat, buckling him in. Rather than looking at us, Luke takes interest in the leaves falling from a nearby tree blowing in the wind, a slight smile on his sleepy face.

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“The eye contact is just something for us to be mindful of,” I reply. “Not an emergency, by any means. Just something we can work on when we’re helping him with his social skills.”

I close the door and turn to Eric. My husband’s face is still frowning. He looks lost in thought, about to disappear into his own mental space and slam the door shut. I know this look well on him, and usually I leave him alone and let him be with his thoughts until he’s ready to talk.

But not today.

I stand up on my tip toes, putting my hands on his chest, and kiss him hard.

“Stop it.”

“Stop what?”

“Overthinking stuff,” I reply. “Luke is fine. He’s a bright, kind, sensitive, creative little boy. He’s just like his daddy.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of,” he says grimly.

“What would be so bad about being like you?” I ask.

He doesn’t reply.

“You know, I prayed for this,” I continue.

“You prayed...for what?”

“That our son would be like you,” I answer.

“I didn’t even know you pray.”

“I don’t, usually,” I say. “But when you have a high risk pregnancy with a baby you never thought you’d be physically capable of conceiving...you pray. A lot. And my prayers were answered. Luke is healthy, happy, and thriving. That’s what the teacher said. And he’s going to be his own person, with his own quirks and challenges in life. If he’s just like you, then that means he’s got a father who can guide him through those challenges. That’s a good thing. Okay?”

Eric’s eyes finally come into focus, moving across my face.

“I couldn’t do this without you,” he says.

I don’t ask what he’s referring to when he says “this.”

Could be parenting. Could be marriage.

Could be life, and everything in it, that he claims he can’t do without me.

How could a man so strong need me so much? It doesn’t make any sense to me, and yet I know without question that it must be true.

Because Eric doesn’t lie. He doesn’t flatter people. And he doesn’t exaggerate.

“I feel the same way,” I whisper.

He kisses me now, hard, lifting me off my feet and holding me to his body.